

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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DECEMBER 18, 2025

## Moderate N.Y. Democrat Rory Lancman hoping to reinvigorate party's centrist wing in the suburbs

*The former state assemblyman told JI: 'I confess to being disappointed that Democrats aren't making a bright line litmus test out of whether someone supports the existence of the Jewish state'*

By Haley Cohen

While the Democratic Party's far-left wing has gained ground in New York City — an ascendance reflected in Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani's victory — in the moderate-minded suburbs outside of the city, Democrats are reeling from the party's embrace of its radical elements.

To that end, moderate Democrats are stepping up in key races, aggressively distancing themselves from the far-left wing of the party — and hoping the taint doesn't affect the party's brand at large heading into next year's midterm elections.

Rory Lancman, a civil rights attorney and former state assemblyman, is one of those

moderate candidates looking to showcase the other side of the Democratic Party. He launched an exploratory committee on Monday in a heavily Jewish state Senate district in Long Island, which is currently held by Republican state Sen. Jack Martins.

"The Democratic brand has been severely damaged by Mamdani and others, particularly [for] those Democrats like myself who are deeply committed to the safety and security of Israel, and deeply committed to the safety and security of the American Jewish community — whether it's in our synagogues or on college campuses," Lancman told *Jewish Insider*.

Lancman, 56, previously served as a

member of the New York State Assembly, representing the 25th District in Queens from 2007 to 2013. He then served in the New York City Council from 2014 until 2020, where he was among the sponsors of a resolution condemning the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel.

Currently, he serves as director of corporate initiatives and senior counsel at the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, where he oversees lawsuits alleging antisemitism in the workplace, in labor unions and on college campuses.

Lancman's interest in returning to

the political arena is driven by a desire to counter “the kind of anti-Israel agenda that Mamdani has committed himself to,” he told JI, referring to the incoming mayor’s hostile views about Israel, including his refusal to denounce the phrase “globalize the intifada” and pledge to discontinue the New York City-Israel Economic Council, a new joint initiative between the two governments aimed at building economic ties.

“There’s a lot the state legislature could do,” Lancman continued. “It’s important for New York state to adopt the definition of antisemitism that is clear to be applied in circumstances all across the state, that’s the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition which many states have adopted. It’s hard to solve a problem if you lack a basic definition of what that problem is.” (The definition is recognized and used by specific local governments, state entities and institutions within New York, but has not been universally adopted by the state.)

Lancman also called for reform to New York anti-discrimination laws “to make it easier for Jewish students to bring claims of discrimination under state law and to make it easier for Jewish businesses experiencing BDS to bring claims under state law.”

**“We need to protect our houses of worship by adopting a New York State version of the Federal Faith Act, which is a law that can be strengthened and made useful in New York,” said Lancman. “I would like to see New York state explicitly prohibit any film production company that is engaged in BDS from being eligible for a New York state film tax credit.”**

“We need to take real steps to protect our houses of worship and protect us from violence on the street. All of these tools are the ones I’ve used in the last two years [at the Brandeis Center] to protect Jews who have experienced antisemitism.”

For example, he’d like to see New York’s longstanding anti-mask laws, which were abolished during the COVID pandemic, reinstated. “If someone is walking around in a protest and covering their face, whether it’s with a white hood or a keffiyeh, it’s probably because they’re up to no good. We

had a mask law in New York for decades and everyone understood its value.”

“We need to protect our houses of worship by adopting a New York State version of the Federal Faith Act, which is a law that can be strengthened and made useful in New York,” continued Lancman. “I would like to see New York state explicitly prohibit any film production company that is engaged in BDS from being eligible for a New York state film tax credit.”

Identifying himself as a centrist, Lancman said he is well-placed to earn the trust of Democratic voters, many of whom cite their primary issue as the high cost of living in Nassau County. Like many Democrats, Lancman is “disturbed by things coming out of Washington,” but also has a “lingering mistrust about whether the Democratic Party is committed to defending Jewish life in this country.”

The state Democratic Party chair, Jay Jacobs, who has spoken out against Mamdani, backed Lancman’s effort to flip the seat, saying earlier this week that “Rory’s lifetime of service to New York and record of delivering for Long Islanders would make him an excellent candidate, and we’re enthusiastic at the prospect of him running.”

Martins’ office did not respond to multiple requests for comment from JI. While representing Nassau County’s District 7, which has a sizable Jewish community, Martins has advocated for increased security funding for Jewish (and other nonpublic) schools through the Nonpublic School Safety Equipment Grant. In February 2023, the NYS Senate Republican Conference appointed him to chair the Antisemitism Working Group, which produced a report on the rise of antisemitism in 2024.

The campaign arm of the state Senate Republicans called Lancman the product of “extreme City Council policies that drove up costs.”

**“We can’t sacrifice one of our two major political parties to the antisemitic leadership and agenda, that would be catastrophic for the Jewish community in the United States and I refuse to surrender my party to the Zohran Mamdanis of the world,” said Lancman.**

“My record, my consistent views, my outspoken opposition to Mamdani, will earn people’s trust on the issue of Israel and combating antisemitism,” Lancman told JI. “From there, we can talk about the things that clearly favor Democrats, which are making life more affordable from property taxes to energy costs, those are our issues. In a district like this though, a Democrat has got to establish a real connection and trust on defending Jewish life in this country.”

In the state Assembly, Lancman said he would draw on a mantra he’s adopted from his time at the Brandeis Center: “That civil rights laws also protect Jews and that those laws need to be exercised to their fullest and need to be expanded and made robust as possible to address the antisemitic threats we are experiencing at this moment in time,” he said.

“We can’t sacrifice one of our two major political parties to the antisemitic leadership and agenda, that would be catastrophic for the Jewish community in the United States and I refuse to surrender my party to the Zohran Mamdanis of the world,” continued Lancman. “Being able to convert one’s beliefs and point of view into actual legislation and policy, and have an effect on protecting Jews, is not easy. The job is not just proclamation. The job is making people’s lives better, and in the case of the Jewish community, it is quite literally protecting our place in this country.”

“I confess to being disappointed that Democrats aren’t making a bright line litmus test out of whether someone supports the existence of the Jewish state,” said Lancman, adding that his work at Brandeis Center since the Oct. 7, 2023 terrorist attacks has “reinforced” the belief that “anti-Zionism is antisemitism and that if you hate the Jewish state, you hate the Jewish people.”

“We see that played out every day in this country and around the world. We cannot let that ideology take hold in the Democratic party, and I’m committed to defeating anti-Zionism and antisemitism in the Democratic party. You don’t need to bend the knee to antisemitism or socialism to be a Democrat.” ♦

# Norman Podhoretz remembered as visionary of neoconservative thought

*The longtime Commentary editor's passionate defense of Israel helped shape the Republican Party of the time*

By Matthew Kassel

Norman Podhoretz, the pugnacious editor and neoconservative pioneer who died on Tuesday at the age of 95, charted a protean trajectory through American politics and intellectual discourse, rising to prominence as a leading champion of a muscular foreign policy vision conjoined with a fierce support for Israel that influenced such presidents as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

Despite his early political conversion from staunch liberal to conservative trailblazer, Podhoretz — the always-ambitious son of a Yiddish-speaking milkman from Eastern Europe who was born in Brownsville, Brooklyn — remained consistent in his commitment to defending Israel as well as promoting the Jewish ideals that guided his social and professional ascent.

During his 35-year tenure helming *Commentary*— from 1960 to 1995 — he established the periodical as a lightning rod of disputatious ideas that helped drive the conservative movement, while at the same time building his reputation as an estimable thinker in Jewish American debate of the mid-20th century.

Under his editorial stewardship, Podhoretz transformed the magazine — then published by the American Jewish Committee — into a pro-Israel force that significantly shaped American foreign policy in the Middle East while helping steer the GOP to a more instinctive embrace of the Jewish state as a key ally.

“The neoconservatives played a pivotal role in providing the intellectual firepower for the case for Israel,” Jacob Heilbrunn, the author of a book about the movement Podhoretz founded, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview on Wednesday. “They did that not only by arguing that

Israel was a vital outpost in opposing the spread of communism in the Middle East, but also in forging and defending the rise of the evangelicals who supported Israel.”

Absent Podhoretz and his ideological comrades including Irving Kristol, another neoconservative leader, “I don’t think that you would have had the intellectual justification for defending Israel inside the GOP,” Heilbrunn said, noting that the party had previously been “hostile to Israel.”

Podhoretz, who wrote a dozen books including his score-settling debut memoir, *Making It*, published in 1967, was an erstwhile liberal who abandoned the left-wing New York intellectual milieu that nurtured his rise and turned to neoconservatism in the 1960s, after growing disillusioned with a counterculture he viewed as increasingly hostile to Israel following the Six Day War.

“Podhoretz was the founder of neoconservatism,” Joshua Muravchik, an author and like-minded foreign policy expert, told *JI*, noting that the “role is sometimes ascribed to Irving Kristol. In truth, there were two strands.”

Kristol, he argued, “led a group of thinkers who reckoned with the limits of social engineering and the welfare state” — while Podhoretz “led a deeper project, the rediscovery or reassertion of the moral greatness of America, of democracy and of Western civilization.”

“This made him not only a great American patriot but a great Jewish patriot,” he said, “because Israel is a precious, against-all-odds outpost of Western civilization and because the roots of American civic culture and Western civilization are found in the Hebrew bible.”

In publishing major articles by the likes of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick as well as Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, Podhoretz “set a high standard

for Jewish intellectual periodicals” while also playing “a role in opening up the Jewish community to more conservative views that had not previously been admitted,” said Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University.

“Even those who didn’t agree with him I think respected his standard,” Sarna, who published his first article in *Commentary* in his mid-20s, told *JI* in an interview. “I’m sure I’m not the only one who feels indebted to Norman.”

Mark Gerson, an author and businessman who interviewed Podhoretz while working on his 1997 book, *The Neoconservative Vision*, called the late editor “a towering intellectual” and a “great man of ideas who made *Commentary*, when he took it over, one of the best magazines or publications ever.”

“It was always interesting, always intellectually serious, always rigorous, always challenging,” he said. Podhoretz, who was otherwise recognized as an astute if often acid-penned literary critic, “had a unique ability to come up with the most interesting ideas, to tell the most visceral truths and to recruit some people who became defining the writers of his generation,” Gerson told *JI*.

The magazine is now edited by Podhoretz’s son, John, who wrote in a tribute on Tuesday that his father’s “knowledge extended beyond literature to Jewish history, Jewish thinking, Jewish faith, and the Hebrew Bible.”

“Norman believed that words matter, and arguments matter, and his leadership of *Commentary* was a 30-year effort at putting forward the best arguments in defense of America, Israel, the West and the Jews,” said Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and Podhoretz’s stepson-in-law. “He looked for the best

writers and champions of this cause, from Moynihan and Kirkpatrick to dozens of young voices, and he engaged them in this noble cause.”

“There was no magic formula beyond logic, language and unwavering moral commitment,” Abrams told JI.

Podhoretz, of course, had many critics on the left and right — including among some former writers. Robert Alter, the renowned biblical translator who frequently contributed to *Commentary*, said he had “mixed thoughts about Norman.”

“Early in his career, he was admirable in attracting promising young writers,” he told JI on Wednesday. “His staunch defense of Israel, as the American left moved toward anti-Israel positions after 1967, was politically valuable.”

But while Podhoretz had “made

*Commentary* the central journal in American intellectual life” during the 1960s, his politics had, by the end of the decade, “hardened into a rather rigid neoconservatism,” he added. “The eventual result was that *Commentary* became a kind of sectarian publication with a much smaller readership.”

In recent years, the movement Podhoretz led has also faced backlash from isolationist and America First conservatives who have pejoratively invoked the term “neoconservative” as representative of the sort of hawkish interventionism that helped lead the U.S. into war in Iraq and other quagmires across the Middle East.

Though his movement was usurped by President Donald Trump, Podhoretz — unlike other fellow neoconservatives — backed his campaign in 2016, citing concerns about Hillary Clinton’s support

for the Iran nuclear agreement which he viewed as disastrous. In a characteristically cutting explanation, Podhoretz said at the time that he skeptically viewed Trump as “Pat Buchanan without the antisemitism,” underscoring the extent to which his attachment to Israel fueled his political thinking.

But even as the ideals that Podhoretz had long championed have largely “been steamrollered now by Trump,” said Heilbrunn, the scrappy editor and public intellectual “will be there in the conservative pantheon” and “played a key role in reshaping the Republican Party.”

“And who knows, neoconservatism is a protean movement,” Heilbrunn speculated. “It can always make a comeback.” ♦

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## Australian philanthropy leaders scramble as community faces unprecedented needs after terror attack

*With major uncertainty regarding the government's role in relief efforts, Jewish groups look to provide for victims' families and survivors*

By Judah Ari Gross

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Australian Jewish philanthropy leaders are scrambling in the wake of Sunday’s deadly terror attack at Sydney’s Bondi Beach, trying to provide for the victims and the wider community’s immediate needs, planning for future ones and coordinating with government officials to understand what will be provided by the state and what philanthropy will need to cover. And they are doing it as they are themselves grappling with the deadliest attack that their country has ever faced and the deadliest attack on a Diaspora Jewish community in more than 30 years.

Even the issue of paying for the funerals of the victims is proving to be a struggle,

Alain Hasson, CEO of the Jewish Communal Appeal of Sydney, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

The JCA, which serves as the central fundraiser for the Jewish community, similar to a local Jewish federation, has relatively quietly launched a Bondi Relief Fund, alongside Australian Jewish Funders, which is led by Tracie Olcha and serves as a sister organization of the Jewish Funders Network, and the Australia-based Dor Foundation, which focuses on combating antisemitism and hate. Olcha noted that JFN is handling donations from the United States, passing along 100% of the funds raised to Australia.

through which it plans to respond to both those immediate issues and eventually to the long-term recovery needs that the

survivors and the victims’ families are sure to have.

Indeed, at every turn, new issues arise that make the relief effort more complicated. For instance, many of those in attendance at the Chabad candlelighting are from the Russian-speaking community and may not speak English well, if at all. In Australia, this is also the start of summer holidays, so local Jewish children will not necessarily be in an educational framework where they could more easily receive psychological help if needed. Similarly, many staff members of local Jewish organizations, whose services will be needed even more, were planning to go on summer vacation. Some of the families of victims have also raised concerns that larger communal efforts to raise relief funds



will interfere with their own fundraising efforts.

To better understand the needs of the Australian Jewish community today and how the philanthropic world can help, *eJewishPhilanthropy* spoke with Hasson and Olcha on Thursday.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

**Judah Ari Gross: A lot of the responses to the terror attack that have come out of Australia have focused on the political side of things, addressing the antisemitism in the country, and on the spiritual side of things, with the calls to continue spreading light during Hanukkah despite the tragedy. I was hoping to hear from both of you about the practical needs of the survivors and the victims' families. I've been seeing more and more GoFundMe pages for victims, for instance. So what are the needs for the community right now? I'm sure you know that there is a huge desire to help, but people don't always know what is the best, most effective way to do that.**

**Alain Hasson:** So what are the needs in community? The big challenge we have is that there are obvious immediate needs — and I'll get to what they are — but we are waiting on the government to actually inform us of some of the things that they are and aren't paying for. And I probably spent about two, three hours of my time this afternoon trying to navigate between federal and state bureaucracy. And this is the stupidity of how governments operate because last night I was told by one government agency, one minister, who called me and said, "Can I facilitate... funds to help with all the burial costs for the families?" And I said, "100%." And they told me a figure that would be applied to every single family, for every victim. And then this morning, [they said] that has changed, and they're now operating it very differently. And then an announcement in the newspaper said they are doing it another way.

So I'm trying to give information to people who are contacting me, asking, "Is JCA going to support all the victims and the families?" And I'm obviously saying, "Yes," because in my mind and in my

heart, no matter what, we are taking care of these families. But in trying to actually say what the sources of funds are, there is just so much confusion. And not so much confusion within [the Jewish] community, at this point in time, I have to say.

For me, the question around what the government is and isn't going to do is a missing piece in the puzzle around everything. Almost certainly, they will do large elements of security funding. They've been doing that for the last two years. They've offered every resource in terms of policing. But then they make an announcement, again, in a newspaper that they're giving AUS 2 million (\$1.3 million) to mental health. Now what does that mean? I don't have an idea yet.

So the needs of the community are unfolding, is the short answer. We know the immediate priorities are supporting the families. But trying to figure out what that means is a broader question. I'm already starting to talk to people about how we create a victim of terrorist fund, which I think will be a component of this international Bondi Relief Fund that is being communicated worldwide. Once we've collected that, it will then be broken down into components. My hope is that there would be at least AUS 1 million (\$665,000) for each of the victim families. But then we haven't even got into the needs of the wounded.

I was just in Bondi today at the pavilion for the first time with my team. And I started talking to people, and it was bashert, there were some of the survivors there. One of the mothers, whose son had shrapnel across his arm, asked me — understandably and in the most polite way — "What is JCA going to do? What commitments can you get?"

I've had people who are supporting the families concerned that JCA is fundraising against their families. And I've had to explain to them that we are not fundraising against you. You've got to appreciate that there are certain governance issues that certain donors, especially those overseas, want. And JCA is a well-established and well-trusted vehicle. And one of our first priorities will be to ensure that these families are well taken care of.

Now everyone will have a different expectation of what that looks like. No one's quantified what every family's needs look

like because they're all going to be different.

I was given the telephone number this afternoon of [one victim's family], and the request that I got from someone who was at the house was, "It looks like a state of disarray. Can we get a cleaner in there?" So we're going from the minuscule of maintaining day-to-day life to the urgency of now starting to have to think about "How am I going to support this family?"

**JAG: It's so striking to me how similar this is to what we saw here in Israel in the wake of the Oct. 7 attack. How cleaning homes and cooking meals became such a simple but critical way that people helped the families of hostages.**

**AH:** Talking about meals, one day, the office is swamped with food, and we've got wastage, and then today, I got a phone call saying, "Can we get food to the chevra kadisha because they've had to do three funerals in a row and no one's organized food for them?"

**Tracie Olcha:** It's so hard to know what's been taken care of.

**JAG: This attack happened at a Chabad event, is the Bondi Chabad able to help coordinate some of these things or is it focused on dealing with its own losses right now?**

**AH:** They've got their own community network [to take care of one another]. And another thing I'm finding out today, that just landed for me today, I hadn't even thought about it, is that the Bondi Chabad is mainly a Russian-speaking, former Soviet Union community.

And someone was saying to me today, "Has anyone considered that a lot of these families don't speak good English? That their approach to mental health is going to be completely different from the norm." And I said, "I have no idea, but that is the most valid question that I've heard today."

**JAG: We have even written about the mental health aspect and how teams from Israel have been assisting, but that element has not really been raised.**

**TO:** Israeli organizations and the Jewish Agency have just been incredible bringing teams out, the ZAKA team [which helps remove human remains in accordance

with halacha] is out. There's enormous support coming from Israel in particular, which is quite remarkable considering our distance.

**JAG: Australia has socialized medicine so things like hospital bills are not going to be a huge focus for philanthropy, but what are some of the other immediate areas that you are focusing on?**

**AH:** While hospital bills aren't an issue, you're raising an interesting question that I haven't even got into yet with the government and how it's going to be tracking and supporting these [injured] individuals because Australia's never dealt with this situation. This is the most significant terrorist attack to ever happen in Australia. And I'm seeing that in the conversations that I'm having with the government agencies. They are treating it like other emergencies that we are used to dealing with, such as bushfires and floods.

Some of the wounded are going to require rehabilitation, and they may want to go through the private system, so there will be gaps in their fees, and it's a valid question as to who is that gonna cover that.

I don't even know what that looks like because it hasn't yet been brought to our attention.

And, like Tracie, I think it's amazing how many people have come out from Israel. But the challenge is that, eventually, the people from Israel are going to go back.

**TO:** Next week they're going back!

**AH:** Next week some are going back, and as JewishCare has already said to me, "It's great that we've got this triage of support. But some of these individuals are going to need a lifetime of support. And how are we doing that? What is going to be their mental health plan?"

**JAG: And that's just the rehabilitation aspect. Some people, I imagine, will have permanent disabilities that will prevent them from full-time employment, like the person you mentioned who was hit by shrapnel in the arm.**

**TO:** That just reminds me of our manager of philanthropy in Sydney, Natalie. She and her husband just happened to literally put their towel down on [Bondi] beach to go for a swim, and the shots started. They ran

and took cover behind a truck alongside this wounded member of our community, who nearly had his shoulder blown off. With a little bit of help from [the Community Security Group], a little bit of help from Community Health Support, they triaged him and pretty much saved his life behind this truck, for like 20 minutes, half an hour until the ambulance could come and take him.

And he only found out yesterday that his father was killed [in the attack] because they didn't want to tell him until he was stable. So his father was killed, and he's got a serious injury to his shoulder. He had surgery again today. Who knows? I mean, the dust hasn't settled at all, and we're having to start making decisions on what, how and where.

As Al said, the focus is very much on the immediate [needs], knowing that we are going to need to have some sort of victims of terror fund that's going to be a long-term sustainable model to support these families. And it's not just the ones that have serious injuries.

There are a lot of people who ran away from there [when the shooting started], and then there are a lot of people who ran towards it, who are the first responders for both CHS and CSG, and most of them are in their 20s. What is the impact of that going to be and how do we help them, who are the backbone of our community. So there are just multiple layers of complexity to each of the challenges that we're facing right now.

**JAG: Do you have any sense of how that kind of fund will be structured? Or is it still way too early for that?**

**TO:** It's way too early, Judah.

**AH:** Look, it's way too early, but the seeds have already been planted. The Bondi Relief Fund will be the primary funding pool. And once we've raised those funds and once we understand from the government exactly what they are fulfilling, that is when we can start to plan on how we're going to break down the funds raised through the general appeal.

JCA operates as the dollar of last resort. We want to make sure that every single dollar is stretched and is impactful as it can be. But I imagine that there will be a victims of terror fund administered by — most likely — JewishCare, which has relationships with

the families and the wounded. Obviously, we'll learn from United Israel Appeal and Keren Hayesod and others, because why reinvent the wheel if we don't have to?

**TO:** We come from a country that doesn't really have gun violence. This is the first time in over 30 years that we've had any real incidents with guns. Our government isn't set up for this. It wasn't any part of our lived experience. So they're gonna have to do some deep soul searching and work out how they're going to manage this, and then the Jewish community will step in for whatever they don't, but it's systems of complexity.

But you've also got to remember that it's Dec. 18, I think. I don't even know the date anymore. It is Dec. 18, and we have summer coming in a hot minute. As of Tuesday, most communal organizations close their doors. The school structure is closed.

So kids who would have maybe gone to school and got counselling through the school, and the schools that would be able to step in and support families, that's off the table because the schools all finished last week. So we can't lean into the existing frameworks until February. So there's all of that as well.

**AH:** I had summer plans, like many other people. But if you're gonna step up and lead, you're going to drop those plans, right? I'm already meant to be on holiday. I'm meant to be on a boat without any contact, scuba diving. In order to respond to this crisis and to respond effectively, leadership is going to have to occur. And once we're through this week, depending on what the identified needs are, we are going to have to reach out to leadership and say, "This is our responsibility to be here for certain people." And if that means we need teachers from the schools to cancel their leave to respond at this point in time, we have to do that, right?

**JAG: How prevalent are summer camps?**

**TO:** We don't have a summer camp system like in the United States.

**AH:** I don't know what support the community is going to need for those who do end up staying in Sydney [for the summer]. That's just going to evolve as we see it. I think one of the key objectives... is to have a mass gathering, most likely this Sunday, to mark the end of Hanukkah and to get as many both within the community

and external to the community to be there to commemorate the week.

I learned from [Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh CEO] Jeff Finkelstein, who gave me seven points post-Tree of Life attack. And he said that one of the key objectives is to gather people in mass as quickly as possible. Now we've had little elements of that.

**TO:** Every night, there have been a couple of thousand people at the Hanukkah lighting at Bondi Beach.

**AH:** Yes, but what happens after that, how people start to heal, we don't know. As I say to people, we're currently in *shiva*. We've just had the first funerals. There are a few more to go. Once all the funerals are done and we have this mass gathering is when people will actually pause to say, "OK, what's next?"

**TO:** And another distraction as well is the absolute *balagan* of the government and how it's handling this. The gun laws and the deflections, and it's taking up a lot of headspace as well.

**AH:** If I can add one thing in terms of how the funds will be used, just to end it off. Because we're talking about the immediate triage response and dealing with the wounded, the victims and the other aspects. This came out of the funeral yesterday for Rabbi Eli Schlanger. And I

hate using positive words, but the response to this terrorist attack should actually be one of resurgence by a community in such strength that anyone who ever thinks to perpetrate this again, we just say, "Well, you're just making us stronger and stronger and stronger by doing that."

That is obviously going to require funding. Is the response of the community going to be that we're too afraid to send our kids to public school, so we want to go to a Jewish day school? If so, how are we going to fund all of those additional students? I don't know yet.

I don't know what the knock-on consequences are gonna be. Please God, let us have more kids coming into the Jewish day schools that we can educate, and how are we going to support that with a Zionist, strong Jewish education?

Tracie's got a major project [Launchpad] in terms of leadership development. And I pray to God that we have more people wanting to become leaders in our community, and how do you support them? There's so many things that we can do as a community to uplift our community, and funding hasn't necessarily been easily come by.

So I think one of my hopes — and I know certainly would be Tracie's hope — is that this inspires philanthropists to truly invest

in the community more than they ever have before.

We're waiting to see. Some people are already stepping up. Interestingly enough, through our campaign, and this was intentional, some are from the broader community, the non-Jewish community. So we're hoping we get a large component of that. And then the international Jewish community has been phenomenal in its outreach as well. I've had one of the Jewish communal funds make a grant of \$18,000, and I hope that's multiplied by the almost two hundred communities that there are in North America. Then we're talking about significant funding.

### **JAG: So where do things stand today in terms of the Bondi Relief Fund?**

**AH:** We've just ticked over AUS 1 million (\$665,000). And we haven't really pushed it yet. This has been more soft, just talking to others. We haven't really gone hard on pushing it because, as I said, the message I was getting two nights ago [from victim families] was "Why are you cutting across our fundraising efforts? We need to raise X amount of money per family." So we were sensitive to that. We're sensitive to the fact that we are only in the first four or five days of this. My hope is this will become a very, very significant campaign. ♦

# The new book urging young Jews to take inspiration from Soviet Jewish dissidents

*Izabella Tabarovsky's 'Be a Refusenik' offers a productive mindset and practical ideas for Jewish students facing antisemitism*

By Lahav Harkov

**P**ocket your kippah. Tuck your Star of David into your shirt. Keep your head down as you walk through the quad. That's just some of the advice Jewish college students around the country told the Soviet-born writer and activist Izabella Tabarovsky they were given by the leaders of major Jewish organizations as a strategy to weather the anti-Israel and antisemitic storms that have raged on campus since Oct. 7, 2023.

Tabarovsky's counter-message: Don't hide. Reclaim your Zionism. And take inspiration from the Soviet refuseniks of the 1980s who stared down Communist Party strongman Leonid Brezhnev, held fast to their Judaism and eventually won their freedom.

Tabarovsky lays out some of these strategies for college students in a new book, *Be a Refusenik: A Jewish Student's Survival Guide*, in which she argues that the anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses in recent decades, which has metastasized into antisemitism, mirrors Soviet anti-Jewish propaganda. In the book, Tabarovsky looks back to that era not only to understand the root causes of contemporary antisemitism, but to take inspiration on how to fight it.

The book features a history of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda with its parallels to the rhetoric on college campuses today, interviews with refuseniks – Soviet Jews who were denied the right to emigrate to Israel, and often imprisoned for trying – and campus activists, and a foreword from the best-known refusenik, Natan Sharansky. Tabarovsky, who was born in the Soviet Union, emigrated to the U.S. in 1990 and now lives in Israel, also offers concrete strategies for students encountering antisemitism to stand proud and strong as Jews.

Tabarovsky told *Jewish Insider* that she saw a need for her book after many

discussions with young Jews: "We're in a bleak moment, and a lot of books diagnose the bleakness. ... I saw a hunger for an inspirational message."

In the near-decade that she has been writing about the subject, it has become "widely accepted among scholars and people involved in this [activism] that the patterns of anti-Zionist demonization and erasure are some of what Soviet Jews experienced in [former Soviet Union leader Leonid] Brezhnev's USSR," she said.

"If American Jews are today encountering the same language, the same explanatory logic and worldview ... wouldn't it make sense to look at how Soviet Jews responded?" Tabarovsky said. "We have this heroic story at the center of the Soviet Jewish story, which is really bleak, but had one really bright light that led to massive change."

Tabarovsky clarified that, while the U.S. is a democracy and the Soviet Union was an oppressive totalitarian regime, "historic parallels are complex and nothing is ever exactly the same. I would never say that America today is like Brezhnev's USSR, and the dangers that American Jews face are incomparable to what somebody like Sharansky faced."

However, she said, "what is similar are the ideological echoes and anti-Zionist erasure. ... In every society, there is a scale of punishments that's different. What's the worst thing that can happen in America? Your reputation is ruined; you lose your career, you're ruined financially. All of these things can happen to people who declare themselves Zionists."

While the refuseniks are remembered for their attempts to emigrate from the Soviet Union, *Be a Refusenik* focuses on their domestic dissident activity, especially their underground actions to strengthen

Jewish identity, spread Jewish education, teach Hebrew and learn about Israel and Zionism. They were "crowdsourcing Jewish knowledge" when the Soviet party line was that "Zionism is racism, is Nazism," Tabarovsky recounted.

Part of the strategy Tabarovsky suggests for young Jews on campus is modeled after "an inner journey the refuseniks took" in strengthening their Jewish identity.

"Some refuseniks told me this is how they viewed it," Tabarovsky said, "the system refused to allow them something they wanted, but before that, they refused [to accept] something about the system itself. They refused [to accept] the antisemitism that the system demanded from them, that they erase their Jewish identity, that they give up their sense of peoplehood. ... The refuseniks said 'we don't buy it; we refuse [to accept] this version of reality. We believe something different.'"

Tabarovsky noted that in her speaking engagement with young American Jews, she realized that many are unfamiliar with the refuseniks, and when she would ask for examples of Jewish heroes, they would usually mention the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or the Maccabees.

"[Refuseniks] are a real example of Jewish courage and defiance. ... They found each other and created a different reality. They wrote their own Jewish story and recreated the Jewish identity that had been taken away from them. ... They are the role models we need," she said.

Tabarovsky said that American Jews need to rebalance the narratives of Jewish victimhood and heroism, because victimhood has become too dominant.

"You read the horrible things refuseniks went through, but none of them talked about themselves as victims," she said. "They felt like protagonists in their own story."



They took responsibility; they took risks consciously. We need to think of ourselves in these terms, as well.”

Tabarovsky said she heard from many students who were told by large Jewish organizations to keep their heads down and try not to provoke or attract attention, or engage, and applauded those who did not take that advice.

To Jewish students, Tabarovsky suggests: “Reclaim your Zionism.”

“Build a community. Find other people

like you. Re-empower yourself and think about your situation strategically,” she said. “The Jewish community has been improvising responses on the fly, while the other side is in the driver’s seat, creating all these propagandistic narratives. ... We need to think strategically about how we need to organize ourselves.”

Once that happens, Tabarovsky said she is confident that Jewish students “will know how to act.” One example she cited was Lishi Baker, a rising senior at Columbia studying

Middle East history, who she said saw American flags being defaced during anti-Israel protests at Columbia University and organized a counter-protest with American, not Israeli flags, to show that the protests are not only anti-Israel, but anti-American.

Tabarovsky called on students “to be more creative in the way they protest. The other side is doing all kinds of things to attract the media. The Soviet Jewry movement was so creative and knew how to attract attention.” ♦

DECEMBER 15, 2025

## Serving faith and nation: The rabbis bringing light to U.S. troops on Europe’s front lines

*Jewish military chaplains told JI about their drive to be ohr l’goyim, a light unto the nations*

**By Gabby Deutch**

**T**he women’s basketball team at Rochelle Zell Jewish High School in Chicago was practicing earlier this month ahead of its annual Senior Night when an announcement came over the intercom, presenting a special guest. That’s where the video starts — one of those designed-to-go-viral tearjerkers showing a child reuniting with their parent who is in the military.

“He is joining us after leaving the military service in Europe,” the announcer says. Team members start to look around, smiling but confused, when they see that the door to the gym is open.

“We are grateful for his dedication, especially his daughter Hannah,” the announcer continues. That’s when one

athlete, in a long-sleeve practice jersey and a ponytail, begins to cry and run toward the door. “Thank you for your service and sacrifice, and welcome home, U.S. Army Chaplain Rabbi Aaron Melman.” Everyone cheers. Throwing her arms around her father, Hannah sobs.

Melman, a Conservative rabbi who since 2021 has served as a chaplain in the Illinois Army National Guard, had just returned from a U.S. Army base in Western Poland. He submitted his request for leave back in September but didn’t tell his daughter, who was devastated most of all to learn his deployment conflicted with the pinnacle of her high school basketball career. (She was more upset that he would miss that game than her graduation.) When she hugged

him, Melman took off his cap and revealed a light brown yarmulke that matched his fatigues.

“We made it happen,” Melman tells his daughter in the video, smiling. Days later, RZJHS won at Senior Night. Hannah scored four points.

For more than two decades after he graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2002, Melman was a congregational rabbi in the northern suburbs of Chicago. He had thought, early in his career, about joining the military — his father served in the U.S. Army Reserves — but decided against enlisting, recognizing that serving in active duty would be challenging as he raised two young children.

But later, when his kids were older,

the itch to serve returned. Melman was commissioned as an officer in the Illinois Army National Guard, a responsibility that typically required two days of service a month and two weeks each year, until he was sent to Poland earlier this year. That assignment made him one of several Jewish chaplains serving on the front lines of Europe, providing religious support and counseling to American soldiers — most of whom are not Jewish — who are stationed in Germany, Poland and other allied nations largely as a bulwark against Russia.

Many Jewish chaplains serve in the military only part-time. They fit the training into already-busy schedules leading congregations and providing pastoral care to people in their own communities.

Several military rabbis told JI that they view their mission as more than counseling the soldiers in their care and helping them deal with the hardships of military service. They explained that it's also about reminding American Jews — many of whom have parents or grandparents who fought in World War II, Korea or Vietnam — about the value of service. During World War II, the military printed pocket-sized Hebrew bibles for Jewish soldiers. Today, some Jews don't know anyone serving in the military.

"Most Jews in America are not connected in any way, shape or form to the United States Armed Forces. The common reaction many of us get, when we go into the armed forces here in the States is, 'Oh, you don't want to go into the IDF?' or, 'Why didn't you go into the IDF?' And for the record, I happen to be a very strong Zionist," Melman told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week. "One of the things for me that I've really grown to appreciate is trying to connect the younger generation of American Jews into joining or thinking about joining the military and how important it is."

Rabbi Aaron Gaber spent nine months at Grafenwoehr, a major American base in Germany, starting last summer. As a member of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, his unit's mission was to train Ukrainian soldiers, and Gaber was tasked with training Ukrainian chaplains. He took them to the Memorium Nuremberg Trials, a museum located inside the German courtroom where Nazi leaders were tried for their crimes after World War II.

"That created a whole conversation about moral integrity and personal courage. How do you say to your commander, 'Don't commit atrocities'? Or how do you keep your soldiers who are angry at what's happening and want to do things that are unethical or immoral from doing that?" Gaber told JI. "That elicited a whole conversation on a theological level about light versus darkness, good versus evil, but also then on a practical level: How do you advise your commander in a way that gives him or her the option not to do something that shouldn't be done?"

Most of Gaber's job, when dealing either with Ukrainian troops or American, involved assisting people who were not Jewish.

"As a rabbi, I got to make sure every week there was a Protestant worship service happening," said Gaber, who returned from Germany in June (and specified that he did not lead those services).

Last year, he volunteered to spend the High Holidays in Poland and Lithuania. He drove between several different bases to make sure Jewish soldiers had access to religious services, food and learning opportunities tied to the holidays.

"I take the idea of *ohr l'goyim*, or bringing light to the world, I was able to bring light to the world. I was able to help Jewish soldiers celebrate their faith. If I met 10 Jewish soldiers through the entire two weeks, that was a lot. So it was individual work," Gaber said. "In one case, I had one soldier travel, I think, three hours each way to be able to spend an hour with me. He couldn't go by himself, so he had a noncommissioned officer, one of his squad leaders, go with him. That was the length that the military can and does go to make sure soldiers can access their faith."

*Ohr l'goyim* is a phrase that comes up often for Jewish military chaplains. For Rabbi Laurence Bazer, a retired U.S. Army colonel who is now a vice president at the JCC Association and the Jewish Welfare Board's Jewish Chaplains Council, those words — from the Book of Isaiah — commanded him to be a light unto the nations. "And that's not just to our own fellow Jews, but to the rest of the community," Bazer told JI.

A friend of his from the North Dakota National Guard once took Bazer, who served in the Massachusetts Army National Guard, to visit North Dakota's state partner

in Ghana. He sat down with a group of Ghanaian soldiers and told them to ask him anything they might want to know about Judaism.

"Now, these are all Catholic, Protestant and Muslim chaplains from the Ghanaian army," Bazer recalled. "I said, 'You could ask me, like, why Jews don't believe in the New Testament, or Jesus, whatever.' That's part of the role that I love doing, of being, again, *ohr l'goyim*, a light unto the nations, to be able to share the positive, affirming side of Judaism so that they felt enriched. It was all in true fellowship of, we're all servants of the Divine."

Bazer spent his final years in the military in Washington, working full time in an active duty role at the National Guard's headquarters. He oversaw the religious response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 racial-justice protests and the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

"I was advising commanders up to four stars at a senior level about what's going on religiously, which really meant the moral welfare of their troops," said Bazer, who had served in New York during the 9/11 attacks and later led the chaplaincy response to the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013. "That emotional level affects readiness, and chaplains are the key to help that readiness."

In 2023, Bazer was asked to go to Europe to lead Passover services and programming for Jewish troops. He led Passover Seders in Germany and Poland, and then drove between Lithuania and Latvia, delivering matzah and visiting with Jewish soldiers.

The Seder at Grafenwoehr took place on a large lawn on the base. After he spoke about opening the door for the prophet Elijah, a symbolic act tied to hope that the Messiah will come, a Christian chaplain on base who had attended the Seder pulled Bazer aside. He pointed to a tower that stood next to the lawn.

"He says, 'You know, Hitler used to go up there and watch,'" Bazer said. The base — now so central to America's operations in Europe — was once used by the Nazis. "To think that back then he used to watch the Nazis do formation, and now, in 2023 we're holding a Passover Seder on the same base in the shadow of that tower is an incredible experience." ♦

# Bringing extensive Israel experience, Julie Fisher readies to take helm of the Good People Fund

*Fisher will succeed her mentor, Naomi Eisenberger, who launched the foundation 17 years ago*

By Nira Dayanim

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

In 2008, Naomi Eisenberger founded the Good People Fund, a grantmaking organization that provides financial support and mentorship to small and mid-sized nonprofits led by changemakers — referred to as “Good People.”

Before launching the Good People Fund, Eisenberger, a nonprofit leader and business professional with a background in education, served as managing director of the Ziv Tzedakah Fund. Like GPF, Ziv Tzedakah supported grassroots charitable projects, primarily in Israel. Eisenberger was a mentee of Ziv’s founder, Danny Siegel, and spent more than a decade at the fund until Siegel closed it, citing its growth as an obstacle to maintaining the lean, hands-on model that had defined its early years.

Eighteen years after founding the Good People Fund, Eisenberger is passing the torch to Julie Fisher, a nonprofit leader in her own right. Fisher founded the Consortium for Israel and the Asylum Seekers, which advocates for African asylum seekers in Israel, and served six years on the board of trustees of the Walworth Barbour American International School in Israel.

Fisher is also a longtime mentee of Eisenberger’s. The two met at a Good People Fund event in Israel eight years ago, while Fisher’s spouse, Daniel Shapiro, was serving as U.S. ambassador to Israel. After returning to the United States, Fisher became GPF’s first director of engagement in 2023. Earlier this year, she was named associate executive director, and in July, she will assume the role of executive director, while Eisenberger transitions to executive director emeritus and “master mentor.”

Earlier this month, Fisher spoke to eJewishPhilanthropy about the leadership transition, how to identify “good people” and the challenges both Israeli and American

grantees have faced of late.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

**Nira Dayanim: Come July, you’ll be the executive director of the Good People Fund. What have the last few months looked like since that transition was announced, and what’s on the horizon as you step into the role?**

**Julie Fisher:** I have been involved with the fund and a fan and mentee of Naomi Eisenberger for the past eight years. So although this news may feel new and exciting, it’s actually the culmination of a path that we’ve been on together for eight wonderful years, starting with the night I met Naomi in Tel Aviv at the 10th anniversary of the Good People Fund. Before coming on board officially, I’ve been a supporter of their work and been following along in the journey all of this time. It feels really wonderful to be taking this next step.

We are on a journey of transition that is built on trust and friendship and respect, working with our board, working directly with Naomi and little by little, taking over more responsibilities of running the organization. Naomi in July, will move into her encore role, where she will be working with alumni grantees, and she will be doing outreach for us, and she will be sharing her wisdom and expertise of all of these years with us. We feel very lucky that she’s agreed to stay on and to have a role in the future.

Last year, Naomi and I and the board together, went through a strategic planning process where we looked at: How has the Good People Fund been able to impact for the last 18 years, and what do we need to do to sustain that good for the next 18 years? And through that process, we have a very clear path forward of strategic priorities that includes strengthening our program and ensuring financial sustainability, refreshing

our governance and infrastructure, and one of our goals was leading a thoughtful transition.

**ND: Can you tell me more about how you met Naomi?**

**JF:** I was in Israel because my husband, Dan, was the ambassador from the United States to Israel, and I left my job in education to go with him and help serve our country. And while I was there, I wasn’t able to work in the embassy or around the local economy, and I began to look for ways to be involved and make a difference outside of my roles and responsibilities within the embassy as the spouse of the US ambassador and, of course, as a mom of three young children.

I became immersed in supporting the African asylum-seeking and refugee community in South Tel Aviv for almost the entire time that I lived in Israel, which ended up being 12 years...Eight years ago, I had been volunteering with a dear friend, Gideon Ben Ami, who is the founder of Pesia’s Kitchen, an organization in Tel Aviv that provides food to those who are hungry, and one day he said to me, “Come and meet my friend Naomi and give a little speech at the 10th anniversary of the Good People Fund.” I had no idea what the Good People Fund was, and I had no idea who his friend Naomi was, but I wanted to honor his request. So I took Dan with me, we went to the restaurant, and I gave my little speech about the incredible innovation that I saw in the social services sector. I always say people always think about “Startup Nation” in the technology area but what I saw was innovation and people looking around and seeing inequities and standing up and finding creative ways to offer dignity and hope and healing. Then we met Naomi. We have a photo of the very first minute that we ever met, which is neat, especially now. I didn’t realize at the time that that evening,

eight years ago, was going to change the path of my life in a fundamental way.

The Good People Fund grantees from Israel stood up one by one, telling their absolutely beautiful stories... the incredible creativity and innovation of the responses to vulnerability and need was astounding, and I was hooked; that was it. I left thinking, "I'm going to follow the Good People Fund and do whatever I can to help." Naomi became my mentor and friend, and that has led us to this transition that's happening today, or I am inheriting the organization that she created, which is such an honor and a privilege.

**ND: Working with those at the early stages of their projects, how do you discern between a beautiful story and an opportunity for making marked change? To what extent is that a gut decision versus a formal process?**

**JF:** I would say it's a combination between gut and logic and really good vetting. I mean, we like to joke that Naomi Eisenberger, our founder, has been doing this for a long time, and her gut is incredible. She knows. And if you look at our numbers, we now have over 260 alumni grantees. So we see our impact, and we see that our numbers are much, much higher than the normal rate of organizations that make it. With our support, we find that our social visionaries are more likely to make it through the beginning years of starting their organizations. We have a system of careful vetting our grantees. We often find them on our own. Every once in a while, some find us, but we really pride ourselves on finding our grantees through careful research, through asking our extended network of trusted folks in the field, in the U.S. and in Israel, who know what we're looking for and that we are different from other funders, and will often send us kind of the gems that they discover in our in our area of beginning stage, social visionaries. Your question is a really good one. How do you know? We meet with each social visionary, individually, we spend a lot of time hearing about their story, not just measuring the passion that they feel, but also talking about what, what is their plan, and how do they intend to impact and to make a difference, and where, where's their motivation coming from? What kind of

resources do they have available? How can we help them? We most often find social visionaries who have already registered as a 501c3 or in Israel, they have their 46 alef but sometimes we find someone with a brilliant, creative idea to repair or heal or give dignity where it's most needed and we will help them become an organization. We will provide a pro bono lawyer to help them with their paperwork, and we will invest in them from Day 1. We have several alums where we gave them their first check in the U.S., and several in Israel, where we were their first supporter outside of Israel, and we helped bring them visibility. And now they're kind of superstars in the field, and we pride ourselves on that.

**ND: Does having that relationship with early-stage changemakers put you in touch with emerging needs that are not yet on the philanthropic radar? If so, what are some of those trends?**

**JF:** Working with social visionaries at the beginning of their journeys has always been a place in the sort of philanthropic ecosystem that is rife with challenges. People always have the passion for their mission and for wanting to make change and to repair, and often struggle to find the funding and to find the support, especially when they don't yet have any impact reporting, because they are new. So we are in that space, in the philanthropic ecosystem, and there aren't a lot of us in that space. We take a calculated bet on the social visionaries who are at the beginning of their journey. There are unique challenges now, and there are always challenges for the brave folks who are in this space, the beginning space. We have seen a plethora of inquiries, and of support larger than ever, this year, even larger than last year. Of organizations that are our targets, and that there are more of them than usual.

A lot of our grantees, because they're so small, they're not as well known, they did not receive a lot of the emergency money that was raised by the primarily American Jewish community post Oct. 7. So the billions of dollars that were funneling in didn't trickle down to many of our grantees, and in fact, some of our grantees who are not in the space of addressing trauma, in particular, found that they lost some of their funding. At the same time, every single

grantee of ours in Israel felt the impact of what the country lived through. So even if it was not necessarily directly related to trauma or the war, every organization was impacted negatively. For example, our organizations that support youth at risk and more people who needed support because of displacement, because of harm to families. So the challenges are significant.

Our founder, Naomi Eisenberger, likes to say, our good people are the canaries in the coal mine, and we can see trends as they're coming. I believe that this is true...some of our young social visionaries who are just beginning to do work in this area, because of the war, were not able to continue and needed to move into more conventional types of employment and not move forward in the social sector, because of things such as spouses who were who were sent off to reserve duty, for weeks and months at a time. So the ability for young social visionaries in Israel to have the space to innovate and be dedicated to this work, there's a real question of how that was possible in the last two years and when that will sort of be possible again.

**ND: You started doing this work after moving to Israel, and have continued it after moving back to the United States. Can you compare those two experiences?**

**JF:** It's been really interesting to have had the experience of being immersed in the philanthropic and humanitarian world in Israel for 12 years, and then to come back here and to work in an area that was newer to me on this side of the ocean. To have this incredible opportunity to use my passion for this work and to stay here in the U.S. and in Israel, and to be able to continue those strong relationships that I had developed when I was there for 12 years, and to also do some of the work of bridge building between the American Jewish community and the Israeli community, which I did from that side. This work allows me to continue that journey. One of the things that has been the most surprising is the connections between our grantees in Israel and in the US. Our grantees are diverse and interesting and come from every background. We are a Jewish organization. We are motivated by our Jewish values, especially of tikkun



olam, repairing the world. And in our portfolio of grantees, we have grantees from every religion and every background, and we pride ourselves on that. Last year, we brought everyone together in New York City for our conference for the first time, and we were stunned to see the collaborations that started between grantees doing vastly different work, coming from vastly different backgrounds. That was a delightful surprise. We knew that everyone would get along and they would learn, and we were stunned with the kind of collaboration and cooperation that we have seen since that time with vastly different grantees that's been absolutely a pleasure to watch and to support.

**ND: What did conversations between the Israeli and American grantees look like at the conference? Did you address Oct. 7 and its aftermath, or try to avoid that topic?**

**JF:** We focus on good people doing good things to help others. And what's amazing is in our beautiful and simple mission of supporting social visionaries as they put more good into the world, we have managed to really stay focused on that. I think that's part of the beauty of what we do, and I don't want to jinx ourselves, but we've managed to really stay in a very calm and peaceful place with our focus on supporting the good work being done in both countries by actual people who've met each other. At our conference in New York City, it was really not about politics or not about the war. It was our focus is wholly on good people, addressing societal challenges and bringing more healing, bringing more dignity in

every way.

**ND: Was that by design, or did those topics naturally not come up?**

**JF:** The conference was designed to support our social visionaries. The work that our social visionaries do, our good people, as we call them, is draining and difficult. Many of them are isolated, and having these two and a half days together that we had last year in New York was like a breath of fresh air. For our Israeli grantees, it was the first time that many of them had left Israel in a year since Oct. 7, so to have a good night's sleep without being awoken by sirens was a gift. The conference was really focused on meeting the needs of our grantees, one of those needs was for our Israeli grantees to have a break and to have time to breathe and to be with their peers. And it wasn't by design, because actually, the conference was scheduled to have occurred the year before, and it was canceled because of Oct 7. It was postponed for a whole year. So it was designed to bring everyone together and to learn and to meet each other for the first time, and that was the goal of the conference. It far exceeded our expectations, because we found that our grantees wanted to connect more. Whether it was someone in food security in Jerusalem or someone addressing food insecurity in Atlanta, Georgia, they obviously had lots to talk about. But the surprising part was people of different religions, faith backgrounds or lived experiences, working on different issues. So someone was working to support families of children with cancer, and someone else was working on a completely different societal challenge, and

because they were both social visionaries who started their own organization and where they were struggling with some of the same things, of fundraising or setting up an organization building sustainability. So the kinds of connections that were fostered were too numerous to count.

**ND: Do you see similarities in the needs of grassroots changemakers in Israel and the United States?**

**JF:** A similarity that stands out tremendously is the exhaustion that social visionaries are feeling. They're kind of being hit from all sides. There's the ongoing humanitarian needs that our good people are trying to address day to day, responding to illness, responding to hunger, responding to societal inequities, and then there are the challenges of the policy implications of what they do and the rollbacks of some of the rights that they fought for. And then there's the fear. A lot of our social visionaries in both countries are seeing a huge uptick, in need from their beneficiaries, and that impacts them both, on the day to day, as well as when thinking about how to get the resources that they need to continue to fuel their mission and do their good work. So for example, our organizations that support refugees in the United States, of which we have three organizations that support new Americans, they are being hard hit by both an uptick in need and push back in terms of losing some funding, in terms of people being fearful to even come out to their events or come out to get the support that they desperately need. ♦

# Lander struggles to land hits on Goldman — beyond disagreeing on Israel

*Lander has been criticizing Goldman for not fighting against Trump, even though he led impeachment efforts against the president*

By Matthew Kassel

The hotly anticipated primary matchup between outgoing New York City Comptroller Brad Lander and Rep. Dan Goldman (D-NY) was widely expected to be a bellwether race that would test the strength of pro-Israel sentiment within the Democratic Party.

Featuring two prominent Jewish New Yorkers with sharply opposing views on the Middle East, the race notably pits Lander, an outspoken critic of Israel and its war in Gaza, against Goldman, a more moderate incumbent viewed as a strong defender of the Jewish state.

But nearly a week after announcing his challenge, Lander, the progressive New York City comptroller, is so far tiptoeing around such differences, even as they are arguably the driving contrast in the primary. Instead, he has more actively emphasized a message that is casting Goldman as ineffective in countering President Donald Trump — declaring it is “time for fighters” and “not folders” in Congress.

His top surrogates — including a range of vocal Israel critics including Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Zohran Mamdani, the mayor-elect of New York City — have made no mention of Middle East policy in their statements endorsing his campaign to represent New York’s 10th Congressional District, which covers Lower Manhattan and a swath of northwest Brooklyn.

“We need more fighters in Washington now more than ever, and Brad is a fighter,” Warren said last week, adding that Lander has “the grit to not just win this race, but deliver for working families.”

Such comments, however, have failed to note that Goldman, who was elected to Congress in 2022, is recognized as a leading Trump antagonist, having served as the top prosecutor in the president’s

first impeachment case. Like Lander, he has frequently confronted the Trump administration on a range of issues including its immigration agenda. Last week, for instance, Goldman seized the spotlight during a fiery House hearing in which he clashed with Kristi Noem, the Homeland Security secretary — accusing her of illegally deporting asylum seekers in a grilling that drew headlines and social media virality.

Warren’s team did not respond to a request for comment when asked why she was not satisfied with Goldman’s record opposing Trump and his administration’s policies.

The early effort by Lander and some of his allies to employ rhetoric focused largely on fighting Trump has obscured how Israel is the clearest dividing line in the race — raising questions about Lander’s strategy as he seeks to shape a narrative Goldman’s supporters have dismissed as a misdirection. Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), in a statement last week, countered that her colleague is one of the “best members” she has “ever served with” and said he “is exactly the right fighter for this moment.”

With opposition to Trump likely a major motivating force for midterm voters, Lander is now facing scrutiny over his attacks targeting a two-term incumbent who has long staked his reputation on effectively battling the president. Meanwhile, in the wake of Israel’s recent ceasefire with Hamas, it remains to be seen if Gaza will continue to be an animating issue heading into the June primary election that is already shaping up to be a heated and expensive race.

Goldman, a Levi Strauss heir whose estimated net worth is up to \$250 million, spent nearly \$5 million of his own money during his first primary bid three years ago, when he narrowly prevailed in a crowded

field of progressive rivals who split the vote. Lander has also targeted Goldman’s personal wealth, saying that the “oligarchy” should not “be able to buy a seat in Congress.”

Even as Lander, a former longtime city councilman from Brooklyn, touts high-profile support from the Senate, House progressives have for their part so far stayed on the sidelines.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), an Israel critic who backed Lander’s comptroller bid in 2021 and called him a “talented hero” after his arrest by federal agents at an immigration courthouse last June, said she is “not weighing into that race right now,” echoing other like-minded lawmakers who also declined to take sides in the looming primary.

While Lander has long identified as a progressive Zionist, he has been outspoken in criticizing Israel’s conduct in Gaza, accusing the country of war crimes and ethnic cleansing. He has additionally called for conditioning U.S. aid to Israel, a measure Goldman has rejected.

**“What Lander is counting on now is the sentiment of the moment, which is further to the left and more anti-Israel,” Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic consultant in New York City, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.**

In a speech before the mayoral election, where he rose to prominence as a top surrogate for Mamdani after losing his own primary bid, Lander advocated for building a “coalition of anti-Zionists and liberal Zionists,” seeking to unify opposing factions to end “the horrors in Gaza.”

Goldman, for his part, chose not to endorse Mamdani, citing concerns about his approach to Israel and rising antisemitism,

but he has said he looks forward to working with the mayor-elect on promoting his affordability agenda.

“What Lander is counting on now is the sentiment of the moment, which is further to the left and more anti-Israel,” Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic consultant in New York City, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Still, in the days after launching his campaign, Lander has sent mixed signals about how he plans to highlight differences with his opponent on Israel.

In his campaign announcement video released last Wednesday, for example, he took a thinly veiled jab at Goldman in vowing not to do “AIPAC’s bidding,” referring to the increasingly demonized pro-Israel group, but did not mention the incumbent by name.

Lander told *The New York Daily News* in an interview last week that he views contrasts over Gaza as ancillary to their approaches to confronting the Trump administration, drawing raised eyebrows from observers who noted that hitting Goldman on his strongest issue avoids addressing a more salient tension over Middle East policy.

“On this issue, we have some disagreements,” he said of Israel, “but the core rationale is because it’s time for fighters not folders,” Lander elaborated on his approach to the race.

One Jewish community leader supportive of Goldman expressed frustration at the logic behind Lander’s challenge. “I’m just pissed that there’s not a single thing they can point to what Goldman isn’t doing right other than being pro-Israel,” he told *JI*, speaking on the condition of anonymity to address a sensitive subject.

During a campaign kickoff event in Brooklyn last week, Lander accused Goldman of failing to hold Israel accountable for its behavior in Gaza, saying “only I, of the two of us, recognize that Netanyahu’s leveling of schools and hospitals and the destruction of Gaza was a war crime,” in reference to the Israeli prime minister. He also reiterated that New Yorkers “don’t want elected officials who do AIPAC bidding in a

district that recognizes that our safety and our freedom is bound up together.”

**Lauren Hitt, a spokesperson for Lander’s campaign, disputed criticism that he is avoiding Israel as a top issue. “Brad literally called out AIPAC in his launch video, so safe to say he will continue to spend quite a bit of time discussing Israel in this race,” she said in a statement to *JI* on Friday.**

On Friday, Lander also said on social media that, if he were a member of Congress, he would introduce a resolution censuring Rep. Randy Fine (R-FL) over his recent incendiary comments calling for Muslims to be “destroyed.” Lander, without directly citing his opponent, also noted he would “not have voted with Republicans” to censure Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) over incendiary comments against Israel during the Israel-Hamas war in 2023, as Goldman himself had done.

Hours later, Goldman also denounced Fine in an X post for remarks assailing Muslims as “barbarians,” calling the statement “despicable and unacceptable” and saying he “must apologize and retract this tweet immediately.”

Lauren Hitt, a spokesperson for Lander’s campaign, disputed criticism that he is avoiding Israel as a top issue. “Brad literally called out AIPAC in his launch video, so safe to say he will continue to spend quite a bit of time discussing Israel in this race,” she said in a statement to *JI* on Friday.

“Brad will also speak to the other issues concerning NY-10 voters, including affordability — another topic where the heir to the Levi Strauss fortune is out of step with the district’s experience. NY-10 voters don’t need a representative that’s palling around with Don[ald Trump] Jr. in the Bahamas, they need someone who understands and represents their views,” Hitt added, referring to an October social media post in which Trump’s son sarcastically thanked Goldman for his “kind words” about the president’s ceasefire and hostage deal during the government shutdown.

For now, it is unclear how AIPAC and pro-Israel groups more broadly are assessing the

matchup — and if they will choose to engage in the primary. A spokesperson for AIPAC declined to weigh in.

In 2022, AIPAC disclosed after Goldman had won his primary that its super PAC, United Democracy Project, had quietly contributed at least \$350,000 to a separate group established near the end of the race to fund a series of attack ads against Yuh-Line Niou, a far-left rival who had drawn controversy for voicing alignment with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel.

One pro-Israel consultant, who was granted anonymity to address a sensitive topic, suggested “AIPAC’s involvement in the race would probably be a negative against Goldman.” Mamdani, an ally of Lander who has long been a fierce critic of Israel, performed well in the district — where Goldman’s views on Israel have faced backlash from left-wing voters.

Democratic Majority for Israel, which is backing Goldman, had been wary of a one-on-one contest with Lander, whom polling has shown is a strong opponent, according to a person familiar with the group’s discussions. Lander’s early consolidation of progressive support helped to push two other rivals on the left not to run in the race, effectively clearing the field for the outgoing comptroller. A spokesperson for DMFI did not respond to requests for comment regarding its plans.

Goldman, meanwhile, said in an interview with a local news outlet last week he welcomes Lander’s challenge but is “not really thinking about” the race “right now.” A campaign spokesperson said that he is “focused on stopping” Trump and “will deal with Brad and other challengers in the new year,” when he is “planning to roll out a flood of” endorsements from fellow House members.

Despite differences over Israel, Goldman is also endorsed by J Street, a progressive Israel advocacy group that has long been close to Lander. A spokesperson for J Street told *JI* in a statement the group is “proud” to back Goldman and “we deeply value his pro-Israel, pro-peace and pro-democracy leadership.”

**“Dan has a progressive record,” said Chris Coffey, a Democratic strategist. “It’s not always as far left on Israel as Brad, for sure, and that is one of the things that differentiates them on policy.” Israel, he added, “could be a defining issue in this race,” regardless of Lander’s messaging efforts to prioritize Trump.**

“We are also grateful for our years-long friendship with Brad Lander, who is a vocal leader for our values. We know that the issue of peace is close to both of their hearts,” the spokesperson continued. “Ultimately, it is up to the district to determine who they want to represent them in Congress, and we are glad to see two J Street-aligned voices in this race.”

A top J Street official, speaking on background to address the primary, confirmed the group will not be engaging

materially in the race as it is satisfied with both candidates’ records. “I expect our donor base will give to both,” the official told JI. “There’s definitely a split of opinion on this race, to say the least.”

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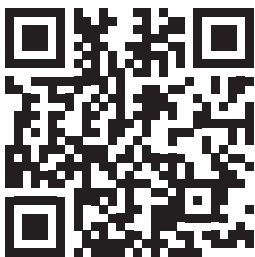
Lander, for his part, could also face backlash from far-left activists in the district who have bristled at his identification as a progressive Zionist and have taken issue with his investments in an Israeli arms producer as comptroller, even as he chose to cease holdings of Israel bonds during his four years in office.

The Democratic Congressional

Campaign Committee, which is focused largely on winning back the House in next year’s midterms, declined to comment on the primary, though it has traditionally backed incumbents.

Locally, a political advocacy group in the district called Brooklyn BridgeBuilders, which is dedicated to fighting antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment, is planning to support Goldman and is currently in the process of formalizing its strategy, according to Ramon Maislen, its CEO.

“The decision to challenge a highly effective liberal Jewish incumbent is incredibly fraught,” Maislen, a Jewish community activist who lives in Park Slope, told JI. “Dan is someone who has been unwavering in taking on Trump, defending our democracy and standing with the Jewish community.” ♦



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