

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 15, 2026

Marine vet Ryan Crosswell aims to flip GOP-held Pennsylvania congressional seat

Crosswell, a former Republican who also served as a federal prosecutor, is touting his pro-Israel bona fides as he fights for the Democratic nomination against Rep. Ryan Mackenzie

By Marc Rod

Former federal prosecutor and Marine veteran Ryan Crosswell is hoping his military and professional background — as well as his past registration as a Republican — will provide a road map to winning the Democratic nomination and ultimately flipping a critical swing district in Pennsylvania.

The 7th Congressional District centered around Allentown and Easton and rated by the *Cook Political Report* as a toss-up is held by Rep. Ryan Mackenzie (R-PA), who himself flipped the seat in 2024. It was

previously held by former Rep. Susan Wild (D-PA).

Crosswell, in an interview with *Jewish Insider*, characterized himself as a lifelong public servant and patriot, both as a Marine and as a federal prosecutor, who “always put my country first, even when it came at personal costs, as when I resigned from the Department of Justice because I felt I was being asked to do something that was inconsistent with my oath.”

Crosswell left the DOJ last February in protest of the Trump administration’s

decision to drop corruption charges against former New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

He’s running for Congress because “this administration is dangerous,” and he wants to fight for affordability and safety for his constituents. He said his experience as an anti-corruption prosecutor makes him “uniquely suited to rebuild some of the guardrails that have been torn down.” He said that restoring those guardrails, including the public corruption section at the DOJ, is critical to having a “functioning democracy.”

Though he's running in the Democratic primary, Crosswell was a registered Republican until after the 2024 election. But he said he's voted consistently for Democratic presidential candidates since 2016.

"[We're] at a point right now, there is one party that's clearly on the right side of history, and one party is clearly on the wrong side of history," Crosswell said.

Crosswell argued that he's the best-placed candidate to flip Republican voters in November. He said a key takeaway from last year's New Jersey and Virginia gubernatorial elections is that Democratic veterans are attractive candidates. He added that his background as a former Republican will help him connect with independent and GOP voters to "explain that the Republican Party is not what it once was."

He also said that his experience as a veteran and federal prosecutor addressing a series of sensitive and high-profile issues makes him best prepared to address a range of subjects as a member of Congress in what he predicted "will be the most challenged Congress in American history."

Crosswell said that he's "uncomfortable with cutting off aid" to Israel, as some in the Democratic Party are advocating for, "because Israel is surrounded by historical enemies and I don't want to put the Israeli people in danger by cutting off aid."

Crosswell is facing off against a series of other more liberal candidates in the primary, most notably Bob Brooks, the leader of the firefighters' union who was endorsed by Gov. Josh Shapiro last month. Though Crosswell led among Democrats in fundraising as of the end of September, Shapiro's endorsement and a fundraiser the popular governor held for Brooks last month are expected to help Brooks close the gap.

Crosswell described Israel as "an important ally to the United States" and the "only true democracy in the Middle East."

He visited Israel and the West Bank shortly before the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terror attacks. He said that he was "just so impressed by the Israeli people, their innovation and technology," and their resilience in the face of both inhospitable environmental conditions and the enmity of surrounding nations."

He said that he's "uncomfortable with cutting off aid" to Israel, as some in the Democratic Party are advocating for, "because Israel is surrounded by historical enemies and I don't want to put the Israeli people in danger by cutting off aid."

He added that "no country is ever entitled to unconditional military aid from the United States under any circumstances, but I'm not willing to cut off aid now."

Crosswell emphasized the need for the ceasefire in Gaza to continue, adding that those responsible for the Oct. 7 attack should be held accountable "through surgical special forces operations with a ceasefire in place."

Asked about the U.S. strikes on Iran last summer, Crosswell said he's "uncomfortable with direct military engagement in Iran at this time," while adding that Israel must make its own decisions about "what the Israelis believe is necessary in their own interest." Crosswell spoke to JI prior to the wave of public protests in Iran, which have led the Trump administration to contemplate renewed U.S. attacks.

"I would prefer to avoid U.S. engagement until it's absolutely necessary," he continued.

He said that, from his conversations in Israel and the West Bank during his visit, he believes both sides want peace, and emphasized the importance of continuing to pursue a two-state solution.

"It's been frustratingly hard getting there, but it is the only solution and we can't give up on it," Crosswell said. "We need to demonstrate that we are advocates for peace, and that we're advocating for both sides. We need to demonstrate that through our actions, that we're committed to this,

that we're willing to have both sides at the table and to work through this, and we need to engage the other Arab nations."

"I was a Justice Department prosecutor, and we have laws on the books to prosecute those who engage in hate crimes, and we should do that," Crosswell said. **"But I think also members of Congress — we need to be outspoken voices, and we need to speak out against it. And so I'd be in favor of any law that or any efforts to expand education on Jewish history, on the Holocaust, antisemitism, certainly any measures that can be taken to ensure the security of Jewish institutions and synagogues."**

He said that the U.S. should not, however, preempt direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and recognize a Palestinian state. And he said that removing Hamas from leadership in Gaza is also a critical step to facilitate peace.

At home, Crosswell called the rise in domestic antisemitism "sickening" and said that it was "heartbreaking" to see armed guards outside a synagogue that he visited recently for an event.

"I was a Justice Department prosecutor, and we have laws on the books to prosecute those who engage in hate crimes, and we should do that," Crosswell said. **"But I think also members of Congress — we need to be outspoken voices, and we need to speak out against it. And so I'd be in favor of any law that or any efforts to expand education on Jewish history, on the Holocaust, antisemitism, certainly any measures that can be taken to ensure the security of Jewish institutions and synagogues."**

He added that, "more than anything else, it's just being voices of moral clarity against hate against anybody, and in particular now, the antisemitic rhetoric and behavior that in some cases we're seeing from both sides."♦

Ex-hostage's wife writes book to help children deal with loss post-Oct. 7

The book, 'Mojo's Return: A Story of Resilience and Hope,' was published in November

By Lahav Harkov

The Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel left children living near the Gaza border with significant emotional baggage — whether they themselves were kidnapped, had a loved one taken hostage or killed, or had to evacuate their home — and their parents and caregivers tasked with helping them regain hope and resilience.

Lishay Miran Lavi, whose husband, Omri Miran, was held hostage by Hamas in Gaza for 738 days, sought to help children deal with loss and uncertainty related to Oct. 7 and beyond, with her new book, *Mojo's Return: A Story of Resilience and Hope*, which was published in Hebrew and English in November.

On Oct. 7, Miran, Miran Lavi and their daughters, then ages 6 months and 2, were in their home in Kibbutz Nahal Oz when Hamas terrorists attacked. Terrorists entered their home and forced a 17-year-old neighbor, under threat of death, to tell the Miran family to come out. The terrorists held the family and other hostages in a nearby home for several hours, broadcasting the scene on Facebook Live. They later kidnapped Miran and others to Gaza, leaving his wife and daughters on the kibbutz. Miran Lavi and her daughters, Roni and Alma, were rescued by IDF soldiers that evening and were evacuated to Kibbutz Kramim, near Beersheva, where they have lived ever since.

Miran Lavi began working on the book with her New York-based co-authors Melissa Stoller and Mary Millman about a year ago, with assistance from ANU — The Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv, as a way to discuss what happened to her family with her two daughters, who were by then 4 and 2.

Proceeds from the book will go to

children's resilience centers near the Gaza border.

"It's a tool to reflect what happened for the girls and help them deal with the fact that their dad [was] not there," Miran Lavi told *Jewish Insider* on Wednesday. "It's for my girls and for everyone's children who experienced Oct. 7 with a great loss, like a father or uncle who is not coming back because he was murdered, or fell in the war."

Mojo's Return tells the story of a father, mother and two girls who were celebrating a holiday together when a storm hits their kibbutz. The storm upends the kibbutz, destroying many homes, and the father and the family's dog, Mojo, disappear. Family, friends and strangers start hanging up signs with the father's name and photo, and the girls would call out at night and say they love their father. Mojo makes his way back to the kibbutz, injured, but months pass and the father does not return. The mother and girls try to rebuild their lives and do fun things such as baking and going on picnics, and they draw pictures of what they did for their father to see when he comes home.

The story ends inconclusively, with the girls and mother sitting on their doorstep with Mojo, hoping that "a new day of sun will arrive."

The co-authors finished writing the book, which was also meant to bring awareness to the hostage crisis, when Miran was still held in Gaza, but it was published weeks after he was freed on Oct. 13, 2025.

Still, Miran Lavi chose to keep the open-ended conclusion to the story.

"The book came from my personal story and everyone's story of Oct. 7, but it can be for anyone and anything, so any ending could happen. We got a happy ending, but that does not always happen," she said.

Miran Lavi said that she and her

daughters "lived with uncertainty for over two years and had to deal with it in different ways," and the book addresses such situations.

Mojo was inspired by the Miran family's real dog, also named Mojo, who like his eponymous book character went missing after the Oct. 7 attacks. Miran Lavi thought Mojo was lost or killed, but he was returned to the family days after the attack. He died in May.

"Mojo was really part of the family," Miran Lavi said. "Mojo's return gave us a lot of hope after the early days of chaos and unclear emotions. We didn't know if Omri was alive or not, but it was very symbolic for us that Mojo was found ... It gave us hope."

Miran Lavi and her co-authors wrote the book in Hebrew and English simultaneously, and released it in both languages.

"The story of Oct. 7 is not just for Israelis," she said. "The book touches on so many things for children who experienced loss anywhere in the world."

Miran Lavi has received videos from other families who read the book.

"It's moving to see the response to something that I created. There are children who said it made them think about lost toys, or a dog that died, or an uncle or father who fell in the war. Everyone takes it to their own place," she said.

The first person to read *Mojo's Return* to Alma and Roni was Omri, after his return from captivity. Miran Lavi recounted that 2-year-old Alma's reaction was: "But dad came back."

"It raised a conversation," she said. "It also made them miss Mojo. We talked about how dad came back but Mojo died. We talked about Mojo and death."

Now that the Miran family is reunited, Miran Lavi said that "it is a great joy, a lot of

fun, but it is not so simple. It's not like Dad is back and everything is O.K. We have a long journey ahead."

The Miran family is one of many hostages' families who have started crowdfunding for support after their loved one's return.

"The State of Israel is really giving us a lot in the area of rehabilitation and

psychological aid, but we set up the crowdfunding to allow us to dedicate ourselves to his journey of rehabilitation and lift ourselves up again," she said.

Meanwhile, the family of four is still living in Kibbutz Kramim, and has yet to decide whether to go back to Nahal Oz: "We're still not in the right place to make that decision. We're at the beginning of our

journey, and it's still open," she said.

Lishay Miran also mentioned Ran Gvili, the final hostage whose body remains in Gaza.

"In all of these months that Omri is back, we still feel like we cannot move forward as long as one of us is left behind, and we call for his return," she said. ♦

JANUARY 14, 2026

Paulson Foundation makes additional donation to Hebrew University for STEM, bringing total to \$46M

Grant from the hedge fund manager's family foundation for the school's Givat Ram campus represents one of the university's largest-ever combined gifts

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 massacres in Israel, Israeli academia has taken hits from multiple directions. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement alone has cost the Hebrew University tens of millions of dollars per year since the war began in Gaza, according to professor Tamir Sheaffer, president of the Hebrew University. This came on top of government budget cuts for higher education due to the war.

"Philanthropic support from our friends around the world is essential," Sheaffer told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

On Tuesday, the Paulson Family Foundation announced a \$19 million donation to Hebrew University on top of a \$27 million donation that it made in 2023, which will be used to expand the school's STEM-based research and teaching complex on the Edmond J. Safra Campus in Jerusalem's Givat Ram neighborhood.

The \$46 million combined gift is one of the largest ever given to the school.

"STEM disciplines are the future, and they're the future of the Israeli economy," Abigail Teller, vice president of the Paulson Family Foundation, told *eJP*. "These developments in STEM and high tech and deep tech will help Israel thrive and shine its light."

The original donation, announced in September 2023, was to build the Paulson Bar-El Building for Computer Science and Engineering, complete with 75,300 square feet of laboratories, classrooms, office space and computer workstations. This second donation will allow the school to supply an existing building with applied physics labs, with the revamped building to be named the John Paulson Building for Electrical Engineering. Hebrew University plans to break ground on both projects in the next few months.

While the donations will support research

in multiple programs, Sheaffer estimates that the funding will most drastically impact the school's applied physics program, allowing the school to increase students from 150 to 250 or more, as well as double the applied physics researchers who would then radically increase their research output.

Other massive donations that have supported Hebrew University over the years have included a \$30 million donation in 2000 from banker Edmond J. Safra's family soon after his passing, leading to the campus named in his honor, and a \$13 million donation in 2020 from The Alfred Landecker Foundation towards initiatives that study the Holocaust, human rights and minority protection.

American hedge fund manager John Paulson, president of Paulson & Co., founded the Paulson Family Foundation in 2009, supporting causes including education, science, the arts, health care and conservation. Paulson has made several

other large donations towards education including in 2015, when he gifted his alma mater, Harvard University, its largest single donation in the form of a \$400 million endowment towards its School of Engineering and Applied Science.

Paulson's philanthropy in Israel has included support for the Jerusalem Campus for the Arts and a 2021 \$15 million donation to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art to mark the museum's 90th anniversary. "Post-Oct. 7, John's commitment to standing with Israel only grew stronger," Teller said.

Paulson's connection to Hebrew University comes via his sister, Theodora Bar-El, a retired laboratory technician who received her doctorate from the school and worked at the university's Alexander Silberman Institute of Life Sciences.

Paulson hopes his donations will "encourage like-minded individuals to do the same," Teller said.

Sheafer noted that education costs at Hebrew University are a small fraction — roughly one-tenth — those at Ivy League universities. In the 2024-2025 academic year, he said, Hebrew University spent \$714 million to educate 23,500 students, costing \$30,400 per student, while Princeton University spent averaged costing \$2.74 billion to educate 9,100 students, meaning \$301,000 per student. "Putting the money on Israeli academia is much more efficient and takes you a much longer way than any investment in any other academic institution in the world," Sheafer said.

Paulson was presented with an honorary doctorate degree during Hebrew University's 87th Board of Governors Meeting held in Jerusalem.

"Universities are the foundation of humanity," Paulson said, during his speech when presented with an honorary doctorate degree during Hebrew University's 87th

Board of Governors Meeting held on June 3, 2024 in Jerusalem. "They provide for the preservation of humanity's collective knowledge, the transfer of knowledge to the next generations and the advancement of the frontiers of human knowledge. At 100 years, Hebrew University has secured a prominent position amongst global universities and has provided the foundation for Israel's current and future success."

Paulson aims to ensure the country remains a tech pioneer by investing in the next generation of leaders, Teller said. "Students will have opportunities to build and develop careers within the state of Israel and hopefully stay there, especially with this new high-tech campus, having everything fully integrated, that students will be able to work and apply their knowledge and continue to contribute to the state." ♦

JANUARY 14, 2026

Mamdani's antisemitism strategy: Reluctant to confront extremist threats while pledging to protect Jews

The mayor's comments responding to pro-Hamas protesters in Queens and an arson attack on a synagogue in Jackson, Miss., illustrate what Mamdani's critics interpret as a core tension animating his assessment of antisemitism

By Matthew Kassel

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani sparked an uproar among Jewish community leaders when, on his first day in office, he revoked an executive order that adopted a definition of antisemitism equating some criticism of Israel with anti-Jewish prejudice.

But the mayor has yet to articulate which, if any, definition of antisemitism he will abide by, raising questions about his views toward escalating anti-Jewish

hate in the city as he continues to weigh in on high-profile issues affecting the Jewish community.

His recent comments responding to pro-Hamas protesters in Queens last week and an arson attack on a synagogue in Jackson, Miss., over the weekend illustrate what Mamdani's critics interpret as a core tension animating his assessment of antisemitism.

While Mamdani released a statement on Sunday calling the arson a "violent

act of antisemitism," his comment on the demonstration outside a synagogue in Kew Gardens Hills where protesters openly voiced support for Hamas was delayed and came only after he faced growing pressure from media outlets and Jewish community leaders to denounce the demonstration.

In contrast with several of his top allies on the left, Mamdani, who has long been an outspoken critic of Israel, ultimately chose not to call the protesters antisemitic,

even as he otherwise denounced Hamas as a “terrorist organization” and said that the chants heard at the demonstration “are wrong and have no place in our city.”

The statements on two separate issues in different states helped distill how Mamdani has traditionally reacted to individual instances of antisemitism. He has unequivocally condemned as antisemitic recent incidents where Jews have faced violent attacks and have been targeted by vandalism, among other acts. But the mayor has been slower to react decisively on protests near Jewish institutions involving anti-Israel activism.

Mamdani, who has long identified as anti-Zionist and refuses to recognize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, drew backlash last November after he admonished a Manhattan synagogue that was also targeted by anti-Israel demonstrators who chanted slogans including “death to the IDF” and “globalize the intifada,” a phrase he has declined to renounce.

Even as he distanced himself from the language used by protesters in objecting to an event about immigration to Israel, Mamdani said that “sacred spaces should not be used to promote activities in violation of international law,” a statement he later revised. He did not label the protest antisemitic, as other elected officials had done. On the recent Queens protest outside an Israeli real estate event, Mamdani used similar language when asked why he hadn’t condemned “both sides.” He answered, “I absolutely have an opposition to the sale of land in the West Bank. It’s a violation of international law and that comes from my belief in the importance of following international law.”

His ongoing reluctance to explicitly identify such protests as antisemitic underscores how his record of pro-Palestinian activism has long been central to his self-conception. While he moderated on several key issues in the election, Mamdani notably resisted softening even some of his most controversial views relating to Israel — such as a pledge to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on charges of war crimes.

“On an ideological level, it’s a very problematic issue to be a proud

anti-Zionist — especially if you are the mayor of New York City,” Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, who leads Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, said. “On a practical level, wherever anti-Zionism has been normalized,” he said, “as night follows day, it leads to antisemitism, in every single case, and it is the case today. There won’t be an exception simply because the mayor, at this time, insists on being an anti-Zionist and is proud of it.”

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, who leads Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Monday that he has spoken with Mamdani repeatedly about what he called a clear connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism — which, he noted, the mayor has not acknowledged.

Even as Hirsch conceded “it’s not necessarily the case in every circumstance” that “anti-Zionism is, ipso facto, antisemitism,” he said such discussions are “completely divorced from reality,” disagreeing with Mamdani’s assessment of the Queens protest last week. “What Jews mean by anti-Zionism is not what Hamas means by anti-Zionism,” he explained. “If you are pro-Hamas, then you are, by definition, an antisemite.”

“On an ideological level, it’s a very problematic issue to be a proud anti-Zionist — especially if you are the mayor of New York City,” Hirsch argued to JI. “On a practical level, wherever anti-Zionism has been normalized,” he said, “as night follows day, it leads to antisemitism, in every single case, and it is the case today. There won’t be an exception simply because the mayor, at this time, insists on being an anti-Zionist and is proud of it.”

The working definition of antisemitism Mamdani rescinded, which is promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, has long been a target of anti-Israel activists and some progressives who believe it stifles legitimate criticism of Israel — even as it is widely accepted as useful guidance by mainstream Jewish groups.

A spokesperson for Mamdani did not respond to a request for comment from JI asking how he would define what he

has frequently called “the scourge of antisemitism” while pledging to ensure the safety of Jewish New Yorkers.

Mamdani has yet to announce key administration hires for areas related to antisemitism, such as the office to combat antisemitism, which he has vowed to retain, and he has sent mixed messages regarding his efforts to fight antisemitism — voicing interest, for example, in a city curriculum embraced by leading Jewish groups that promotes a definition of Zionism seemingly at odds with his own views on Israel.

Shortly before his inauguration, Mamdani argued that a report issued by the Anti-Defamation League, which highlighted several members of his transition team who had used antisemitic tropes and justified Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, attacks, ignored what he called “the distinction between antisemitism and criticism of the Israeli government.” He did not address some of the most extreme comments made by appointees, but said the ADL report “draws attention away from the very real crisis of antisemitism we see.”

Mark Goldfeder, the director of the National Jewish Advocacy Center, said he suspects that Mamdani is now “gearing up to adopt” what he characterized as “one of the ‘IHRA-lite’ definitions” of antisemitism, citing those embraced by the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and the Nexus Project — which he called “a little better than JDA,” though neither are widely accepted by mainstream Jewish organizations. Both definitions, he argued to JI, “provide more cover to those who wish to hide their antisemitism behind the curtain of anti-Zionism.”

Jonathan Jacoby, the president and national director of the Nexus Project, said in a statement to JI on Monday that Mamdani “and all public officials should be judged by the actions they take to protect Jewish communities — not by their adherence to any one controversial definition of antisemitism.”

According to Goldfeder, applying the Nexus definition to the recent incidents addressed by Mamdani “would mean that attacking Jews at a synagogue,” as in Jackson, “would be antisemitic — but

harassing them, as long as no physical attack" took place, as in Queens, "would be fine."

"I, for one, am not OK with either," Goldfeder said. "Neither are the federal government, the majority of U.S. states and the vast majority of Americans both Jewish and non-Jewish."

Jonathan Jacoby, the president and national director of the Nexus Project, said in a statement to JI on Monday that Mamdani "and all public officials should be judged by the actions they take to protect Jewish communities — not by their adherence to any one controversial definition of antisemitism."

"Mamdani has expressed a clear commitment to engaging a wide range of Jewish voices in the fight against antisemitism and hate, and affirmed that the city will continue to operate an office to combat antisemitism," Jacoby added. "Instead of getting hung up on fights over

definitions like IHRA that were never intended to be enshrined into law, we need to see more security funding for vulnerable institutions, more support for more education about antisemitism and bias, and the enforcement of civil rights laws to prevent actual discrimination and harassment."

Amy Spitalnick, the CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said that the "biggest question" for her "is not whether the mayor personally adopts a specific definition but, rather, how he will respond to acts of antisemitism and invest in a comprehensive strategy to counter it."

Rabbi Marc Schneier, who has spoken privately with Mamdani about issues concerning the Jewish community, said he was "pleasantly surprised" that Mamdani spoke out against the Queens protest and called Hamas a terror group, noting that

the mayor had faced scrutiny for not even mentioning Hamas in his initial statement regarding the Oct. 7 attacks.

"We may be witnessing some evolution in terms of his understanding of Israel," Schneier told JI, while adding that the Jewish community has "a long way to go."

Amy Spitalnick, the CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said that the "biggest question" for her "is not whether the mayor personally adopts a specific definition but, rather, how he will respond to acts of antisemitism and invest in a comprehensive strategy to counter it."

"I've appreciated his willingness to engage with our community and evolve his position and I hope that he will continue to do so," she told JI on Monday. "The pro-Hamas protests in Kew Gardens and the arson attack in Jackson are different examples of the many ways antisemitism is manifesting right now. All of it threatens Jews and our broader society and democracy."♦

JANUARY 14, 2025

Saudi Arabia's talks to acquire Chinese-Pakistani JF-17 jets could complicate its pursuit of U.S. F-35s

Analysts tell JI that the move 'is not the behavior Washington can reasonably expect from a partner who would like to be trusted with the F-35'

By Matthew Shea

Reports that Saudi Arabia may strike a deal with Pakistan to acquire Chinese-Pakistani JF-17 Thunder fighter jets are raising concerns in Washington, as Riyadh's potential acquisition of the aircraft signals a continuation of its recent shift in alliances and could complicate its efforts to secure the U.S.' F-35 jet.

The discussions between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, first reported by regional outlets, would deepen defense ties between the two longtime partners while easing Karachi's financial strain by wiping out its \$2 billion in loans from the kingdom.

The JF-17, which is widely used by the Pakistani Air Force, was jointly developed by Pakistan and China, and incorporates Chinese electronic systems and a Russian engine.

Grant Rumley, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the aircraft would offer little operational benefit to Saudi Arabia, which already fields a fleet of U.S.- and European-made fighter jets, and could instead be a sign that Riyadh is aiming to strengthen ties with multiple defense partners.

"I don't think there's any military justification for Saudi Arabia purchasing

this plane," Rumley said, noting that the kingdom's existing F-15s and Eurofighter Typhoons — along with its planned acquisition of the F-35 — would significantly outperform the JF-17. "Saudi understands Pakistan is in a tough economic situation and converting it into JF-17s is a way to alleviate some economic pressure and further intensify or accelerate defense cooperation."

Rumley added that despite the lack of military advantage from the JF-17, Saudi Arabia's desire to acquire the fighter jet linked to U.S. adversaries raises concerns about U.S. national security and Riyadh's

political alignment, potentially prompting backlash that could complicate or even derail Riyadh's procurement of F-35s from the U.S.

"The fact that [the JF-17] has a Russian engine and Chinese avionics means it will very likely be viewed as a security risk if it's co-located near U.S. forces," said Rumley, who warned this arrangement could pose a danger to the protection of U.S. intel. "The F-35 is one of the crown jewels of American military equipment. Protecting that proprietary information and capabilities is a top priority across party lines in the U.S. national security apparatus."

Such a deal could create "undue turbulence" for Saudi Arabia's acquisition of the F-35, potentially "complicating the discussion" around the deal and even putting it "into jeopardy," Rumley said.

While experts said it is unlikely Congress would be able to stop an F-35 sale to Riyadh if the White House gives it the green light, they warned the JF-17 talks could provoke internal pushback within the administration, particularly among officials focused on competition with China.

"The Saudis are publicly entertaining this deal because of their dissatisfaction with U.S. policy, their desire to build leverage that brings America around to the Saudi position and, if that fails, to enable Riyadh to develop alternative security ties," said Jonathan Ruhe, a fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America. "The fact that the Saudis are considering such inferior aircraft, from a less established partner, emphasizes their dislike of how the broader U.S. defense relationship is trending."

"The China hawks within the U.S. will not look favorably on this type of arrangement

in general," said Rumley. "Buying a fighter jet that's co-produced with China and has Chinese technologies, as well as Russian technologies, is going to burn through a lot of goodwill with the folks in Washington."

Jonathan Ruhe, a fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, said a Saudi deal for the JF-17s could also "throw a major wrench in existing defense cooperation with Riyadh," framing the reported talks as part of a potential reassessment of the kingdom's security partnerships.

"The Saudis are publicly entertaining this deal because of their dissatisfaction with U.S. policy, their desire to build leverage that brings America around to the Saudi position and, if that fails, to enable Riyadh to develop alternative security ties," said Ruhe. "The fact that the Saudis are considering such inferior aircraft, from a less established partner, emphasizes their dislike of how the broader U.S. defense relationship is trending."

He added that Saudi Arabia has historically used major arms purchases to build political leverage rather than to fill operational gaps, noting that Saudi officials have closely watched Qatar's use of "checkbook diplomacy" to secure a unilateral U.S. security guarantee last year, even as Riyadh's own mutual defense treaty discussions stalled.

In recent weeks, observers have noted that Saudi Arabia has increasingly pivoted away from moderation and toward Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Pakistan, as seen in their actions in Yemen, Sudan, and the horn of Africa, along with attacking the UAE over its relationship with Israel.

"Riyadh's current security cooperation with China is not the behavior Washington can reasonably expect

from a partner who would like to be trusted with the F-35," said Justin Leopold-Cohen, a senior research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, who noted that any deal should be viewed "in the context of Riyadh's recent naval exercises with China."

"Saudi Arabia looks at Turkey and Pakistan and sees sort of a middleweight power that is able to exert a ton of influence in the profession of arms and is able to put platforms on the market that drive, not only revenues at home, but is also a pretty effective instrument of national power," said Rumley. "And they [Saudi Arabia] want that."

Justin Leopold-Cohen, a senior research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said the reported talks likely reflect Saudi Arabia's desire to "avoid overreliance" on any single defense partner, though he echoed concerns from the U.S. perspective.

"Riyadh's current security cooperation with China is not the behavior Washington can reasonably expect from a partner who would like to be trusted with the F-35," said Leopold-Cohen, who noted that any deal should be viewed "in the context of Riyadh's recent naval exercises with China."

However, Rumley argued that such a deal may not necessarily reflect "realignment from a security standpoint," but could be "more about gaining access to some other technologies."

"It may be that this is simply a way for Saudi Arabia to get access to these jets, rip them up, or reverse engineer them and take those technologies and use them for their own defense, industrial base development," said Rumley. ♦

New Claims Conference grant helps Center for Jewish History solve Holocaust-era family mysteries

With a new grant from the Claims Conference, researchers can use social media and archives to shed light on family histories and educate people about the Holocaust

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

When the Nazis seized Poland in 1939, Ilana Rosenbluth's family fled to Uzbekistan, where her grandfather peddled bolts of fabric used to make suits. Four years later, he boarded a train to Andijan, a city known for textiles, and never returned.

What happened to her grandfather has plagued her family to this day, but a new initiative, Histories and Mysteries, launched last week by The Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute at the Center for Jewish History, where Rosenbluth is director of communications, offers her hope of finding out.

The initiative, backed by a nearly \$300,000 grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, more commonly known as the Claims Conference, looks to solve Holocaust-era family mysteries, posting the research journey across social media, using both Jewish and non-Jewish influencers to educate new audiences about the Holocaust. Rosenbluth hopes it will provide closure to her family and the legion of others with unanswered questions.

To Rosenbluth, growing up with three grandparents seemed like the norm. Any talk of her grandfather was spoken around the household in Polish or Yiddish to shield her from the truth. Only later in life, in 2009, when her father was dying of cancer, did she press him for answers: Why was the only remnant of her grandfather a single photograph?

"I'm so sad that my father died never knowing what happened to his father," she

told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

After receiving an online inquiry, CJH's experts dive into archives, some online, such as the Arolsen Archives, the largest archive on victims and survivors of Nazi persecution, and sometimes contact other experts as far as the Buchenwald Memorial Archives in Germany or the Archives de Vienne in France.

"I like to view it as a puzzle," Jenny Rappaport, CJH's head genealogist, told *eJP*. "You're never going to have all the pieces of a Holocaust story, unfortunately, just due to record loss, because things were destroyed. There aren't all the pieces left. But I try to put it together as much as possible."

Still, there's hope, Miriam Malka Frankel, CJH's social media coordinator, told *eJP*. "People think that 81 years ago, when the Holocaust happened, is just so far away, but it's alarmingly closer than we realize, and there are so many answers that can still be found."

The answers may even come from a simple online game of Jewish geography. CJH plans to pose questions across social media platforms to see if its followers may be able to help. A picture posted on Instagram may lead to someone who knows details about the people in them.

Already, over 20 people have sent in mysteries for CJH to solve, including a woman seeking to find out what happened to her great-grandfather's sugar-making factory in Poland, which had been taken over by the Nazis. She is also seeking to find the factory workers who put their lives in jeopardy to hide her family.

"I would love, ideally, to get a broad range of submissions," Rappaport said.

"For example, people don't often know that Sephardic Jews were incarcerated in concentration camps, and I would love a submission about that."

Submissions so far have been sent by people with zero genealogical research experience to others who come to CJH with well-formed family trees.

"No question is too small, and no question is too big," Frankel said. "If someone is having a mystery and they're feeling shy because they feel it's not as impactful or important as someone else's, we are here to say that every story matters, every question matters."

A question about a lost ring or a stolen necklace could lead to incredible discoveries, Frankel said.

Histories and Mysteries is funded through July 31, with the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute continuing its regular work exploring Jewish family history both during and after the funding ends.

Beginning next month, CJH will share the discoveries across their social media platforms — Facebook, Instagram, X, Tiktok and LinkedIn — partnering with Jewish and non-Jewish influencers, hoping to reach new audiences at a time when some seek to erase the truth about the Holocaust.

"It's one thing to keep promoting things within your own community," Rosenbluth said. "Most Jews know about the Holocaust and know the ramifications of hate, so one of the important things is to push it to a wider audience."

Holocaust stories that once were told through memoirs are now being told through 90-second posts, Gideon Taylor,

president of the Claims Conference, told eJP.

"The biggest challenge for Holocaust education is, how do you make it relevant for a younger generation now, and how do you use the forms of communication that didn't exist 20 years ago or 10 years ago?" he said. "This is a really good example of how Holocaust education has changed, and we changed with it."

Quality Holocaust education isn't about just stating facts, Taylor said. It is about making people ask questions about why people reacted the way they did and what led to these horrors.

"It has to be individual, because the scale [of the Holocaust] is so massive and so huge that, by far, the most effective way for people to learn about something like the Holocaust is through an individual story," he said.

During an age when people ingest information with short attention spans, short-form content allows CJH to reach new demographics, Frankel said.

The findings of the initiative may be bittersweet for many, she said. Participants are "finding out details that might cause discomfort. It might, of course, be sad because they're hearing these horrible details," but learning answers can also provide comfort and closure.

"The Nazis tried so hard to erase us, and just by doing this project, it's a form of resistance," Bonnie Elkaim, lead museum educator and guide at CJH, told eJP.

As an educator for over 27 years in New York City, Elkaim taught students about the Holocaust, but she could never share the story of her great-grandfather because she knew so little about him. When she retired last year, she dedicated herself to learning more about his history, and this project is offering her the opportunity to. "My grandparents were survivors, thank God, but my great-grandfather didn't [survive]," she said. "I do feel that I need to be his voice."

While there is hope that people's

mysteries can be solved, "this might be the very last time you can get a firsthand account" of what occurred, Rosenbluth said.

The CJH has been deep in the archives, searching for information about Rosenbluth's grandfather's disappearance. During their work, they discovered the wedding date of Rosenbluth's grandparents, a detail she never knew.

"It was an amazing feeling," learning the date, Rosenbluth said. Suddenly, her grandparents' story opened before her. They lived a youth filled with optimism that was severed, leaving her grandmother alone with two young children.

Learning the details about her grandfather was learning about herself, she said. "My life didn't begin in the 1970s. It really began in 1939 because everything that happened during World War II, it affects me today."♦

JANUARY 13, 2026

Oct. 7 play lands at Kennedy Center during Trump-era overhaul

The show, from conservative Irish playwrights, had a six-week run off-Broadway in New York in 2024

By Gabby Deutch

Phelim McAleer and Ann McElhinney, an Irish husband-and-wife playwright team, view theater as a way to correct the record. For these conservative artists, their creative mission is to fight liberal orthodoxies with what they deem to be a dose of reality. Their first production, taking a revisionist look at the 2014 killing of Black teenager Michael Brown by a white Missouri police officer, earned national media coverage — and sharp criticism, including from some cast members who quit.

McAleer and McElhinney don't see their latest production as conservative, or political at all, though they fear it will still garner left-wing opprobrium. Titled "October 7: In Their Own Words," the play

offers an unvarnished look at the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas in Israel in 2023, told through the testimonies of Oct. 7 survivors. It premiered in New York in 2024 during a six-week run off-Broadway and will be performed at the Kennedy Center for one night this month, on Jan. 28.

The playwrights view their show as a natural fit for the newly rebranded Kennedy Center, now called The Donald J. Trump and The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, under the leadership of President Donald Trump.

"It's supposed to be the cultural epicenter of America. This is the perfect place for it ... the center of power, the center of influence, and a place that seems to need the truth more than ever," McAleer told *Jewish Insider*

in an interview in December.

Since Trump took over the institution early in 2025, the Kennedy Center has faced protests and boycotts from some liberal critics. After the renaming in December, musician Chuck Redd abruptly canceled his annual Christmas Eve jazz concert in protest, earning threats of a lawsuit from Kennedy Center President Ric Grenell. "Wicked" composer Stephen Schwartz has since pulled out of a scheduled appearance at a May gala, along with a dance company, a string quartet, a jazz trumpeter and a folk performer. On Friday, the Washington National Opera said it would no longer perform at the Kennedy Center, the most high-profile cancellation yet.

Amid the Kennedy Center's controversial

overhaul this year, its new leaders have stood firm on a new branch of programming: shows and artwork focused on Israel and antisemitism. “October 7: In Their Own Words” is part of that effort, along with a visual art exhibit about the Hamas attacks that was displayed in the building in the fall.

The production of their show is not a formal Kennedy Center offering; McAleer and McIlhenney’s production company rented out the stage their team will be using. But Kennedy Center officials view the play as intertwined with other programming offered by the arts center under the Trump administration.

“This all figures into this effort at the Kennedy Center to combat antisemitism through the arts,” said Bonnie Glick, the Kennedy Center’s senior director of individual giving and corporate relations. “We are actively helping them to get the word out about what happened on Oct. 7 through eyewitness accounts.”

A journalist by training, McAleer previously worked as a reporter at the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* in Eastern Europe. He and McElhinney operate under the framework of what’s known as verbatim theater — productions modeled off real events, with the actors portraying real people and reciting, verbatim, their own words.

“It’s the world the way it is, not the way we’d like it to be,” McAleer said. “So that, I

think, is why we went to Israel after Oct. 7, was because we saw people weren’t telling the truth. Or we saw that people were immediately pivoting away from Oct. 7 and pivoting to Gaza.”

Journalism is often described as the “first rough draft of history,” McAleer noted.

“We just felt that nobody was going to write this draft,” McAleer said. “They were all going to write the first draft of the Gaza war without mentioning Oct. 7.”

There is still a degree of editorializing, of course. McAleer and McElhinney had to choose which survivors to include, and to cut down their parts from hours of interviews. But everything spoken on stage in the production came from real conversations.

“Every word on stage was said by someone in our interviews,” McAleer said. “I was very determined that it would be their voices.”

Neither McAleer nor McElhinney had been to Israel prior to 2023. Soon after the Hamas attacks, they turned to Jewish friends in Los Angeles, where they now live, and began to ask around for people to talk to who had been affected by the attacks.

Within weeks, they planned a trip to Israel, and spent three weeks there interviewing Oct. 7 survivors for hours each day. The play starts with each speaker describing how they spent the day before the attack.

“It starts on Oct. 6, and that was very

deliberate,” McAleer said. “They would be at peace now, still, if it wasn’t for Oct. 7.”

When the pair initially cast the show, they said some people opted not to audition for parts because they worried that being in a play so closely connected to Israel might damage their career. The theater community is a “very intolerant bunch,” McAleer noted.

“But then there were people who said, ‘I have to be in this play.’ That was unusual,” McAleer added. “For the first time ever, I saw an audition tape where they would say, ‘Just before I do the audition, I just want to say, this is the most important play I’ve ever auditioned for.’ They broke the rules of auditioning to address us.”

Since the initial run in New York, the play has been performed a handful of times on college campuses. The producers, along with the Kennedy Center, hope that it will serve as an educational tool for people in the area.

“It’s designed and timed to be when Congress is back in session, when schools and universities are back in session,” Glick said. “Their goal is to have this be something that sparks dialogue in a cordial manner, and that brings continued visibility to what happened on Oct. 7 through eyewitness accounts.”

For McAleer, the purpose of the show is straightforward. “All I wanted,” he said, “was to tell the truth.” ♦

Israel set to send a bobsledding team to the Winter Olympic Games for the first time

'It's like the actual talented version of 'Cool Runnings,' Israel bobsled team pilot AJ Edelman tells JI

By Lahav Harkov

The Israeli bobsled team's road to the Winter Olympics in Milan has been as twisting and winding as the Eugenio Monti Sliding Centre course in Cortina that will take sleighers hurtling down a mountain in the Italian Dolomites.

The four-man team is part of a small group of Israeli winter athletes who have been training hard to qualify to compete at the highest level, but they have faced additional challenges on their road to the elite competition. In contrast to their fellow competitors, most of the Israeli team has been serving in IDF reserve duty during the Gaza war, missing key training days and competitions. The team has also faced obstacles from the Israeli Olympic Committee.

Now, despite it all, the athletes are likely to qualify for the Milan games.

Israeli bobsled team pilot Adam "AJ" Edelman, 34, grew up in an Orthodox family in Brookline, Mass.; his older brother is Emmy-winning comedian Alex Edelman.

Playing competitive winter sports since preschool, Edelman made aliyah in 2016 and represented Israel in skeleton in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games. After that, he set a goal to bring the first Israeli bobsled team to the Olympics. After failing to qualify for the 2022 games, Edelman led a two-man team to third place in the North American championship in 2023.

On Sunday, the four-man Israeli team finished fifth in the North American Cup at Lake Placid, N.Y., likely clinching a spot in Milan.

"Bobsled Olympic qualification is very different from all other sports," Edelman explained to Jewish Insider. "In no other sport that we know of can you rank better than someone and your country is not represented."

Some of the leading countries in

bobsledding, such as Germany, Switzerland and the U.S., have more than one team, and the rules stipulate that up to three of a country's teams can be on the 28-team Winter Olympic roster based on the points earned by its top-scoring team. Therefore, Edelman explained, teams ranked lower than Israel could end up qualifying and Team Israel would stay home: "Israel ranked better than three other teams [going to the Olympics from] Australia, China and Latvia, but because Israel has only one good team, we are knocked out of the spot."

However, Edelman was confident that Israel would receive a second-round invitation to the Winter Games next week, saying, "we know that there is a country that will not send their second team, and because Israel is ranked so high, we will be offered that invitation."

In the immediate aftermath of Sunday's race, the team faced an additional challenge: The Israeli Olympic Committee instituted a policy last summer that it would not accept second-round invitations.

However, the committee decided on Thursday to make an exception for the bobsled team.

"After in-depth professional analysis, the Olympic Committee and International Bobsleigh and Skeleton Federation's professional estimation is that the team may place in the top 20 in the four-man team competition in the Winter Olympic Games next month," the Israeli Olympic Committee said in a statement.

As such, the committee said, it would accept an invitation for the bobsled team should one of the other countries' teams choose not to compete and the IBSF extends it to Israel, which would happen early next week.

Gili Lustig, the Israeli Olympic Committee's director-general, said that "the

bobsledding team led by AJ Edelman made impressive progress in recent weeks ... We are proud of the Olympic delegation and the athletes who are waiting expectantly for the Israeli flag to wave in Milano and for our athletes to appear and succeed."

Edelman called the Committee's decision "a beautiful recognition of the skill level of the team. If we get the opportunity to represent the state we are excited to start a tradition of Israeli Bobsled in the Olympics for many years to come. The infrastructure is built. We want to leave it in good hands."

Edelman said that an Israeli bobsled team would stand out and be remembered, "a legacy performance."

"It's like the actual talented version of 'Cool Runnings,'" he said, referring to the John Candy film about an unlikely Jamaican bobsled team competing in the 1988 Olympics.

David Wiseman, a sports commentator who runs the "Follow Team Israel" page on Facebook, noted that the Winter Olympic Games are a staid affair for Israelis, where there are very limited facilities for winter sports and the athletes mostly train in Europe.

"No one cares about them now, but don't tell me that when they're at the opening ceremony waving the flags they won't be on the front page of the newspapers [in Israel]," Wiseman argued. "People get a kick out of seeing Israel compete. This isn't about medals, it's about sport in its purest form, and that's great."

Israel is expected to have four to seven athletes compete in Milan, Wiseman said. The ones certain to be going are Maria Seniuk, a figure skater, who will be Israel's flag-bearer at the opening ceremony; Attila Mihaly Kertesz, a 37-year-old Hungarian-born veterinarian competing in cross-country skiing; a brother and sister,

Benjamin and Noa Szollos, competing in alpine skiing; and Jared Firestone in skeleton.

Edelman recruited his teammates by reaching out to other Israeli athletes on Instagram, and through word of mouth in the Israeli athletic community. They are Ward Fawarseh, a Druze athlete on Israel's national rugby team; Uri Zissman, a pole vaulter; Omer Katz, a springer; and Itamar Sprinz, an Israeli CrossFit champion.

"Bobsled pilots are supposed to just pilot and go home, but Israel doesn't have a team infrastructure," Edelman said. "During the off-season, most of my time was dedicated to trying to find funds ... and trying to find people to be on the team."

In 2022, the Israeli bobsled team "was a spot short" of getting into the Olympics, Edelman recalled. "So I held on, which is what you do when you come 0.1 seconds away from your dream."

The team was supposed to begin training in Lake Placid on Oct. 13, 2023, but six days earlier, after Hamas attacked southern Israel, all of the team's members, except Edelman,

were called up for IDF reserve duty.

"Over the past two years, I have been flying people back and forth from Israel for a week [at a time] to learn the sport," he said. "The team did remarkably well in that time, finishing third overall in North America in its first season, and fourth in the next season."

Ahead of the 2025-2026 season, Edelman brought in spares out of concern that his regular team would have to return to the IDF again, and the spares had to participate in some of the competitions to qualify.

Menachem Chen, Israel's shot put and discus throw champion — who was only available when he had time off from Arkansas State University, where he's on the track and athletics team — rejoined the bobsled team last month, after having been part of its 2022 Olympic bid.

But before Chen, Edelman hired pro-Israel Czech retired athletes to act as spares, which set off a "firestorm," the bobsled pilot recounted.

"People took a look and said 'they're not quite Israelis.' It was all nonsense. ... There

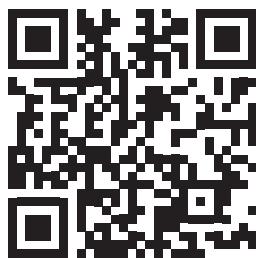
was not a single race in which the spares pushed [the bobsled to start the descent] better than the Israelis," Edelman said, presenting data from recent races to back up his argument.

Since Oct. 7, Edelman has also made a name for himself in pro-Israel advocacy.

Days after the attacks, wearing his Israeli bobsledding uniform, Edelman set up a table in Washington Square Park in New York, and later in other public areas, with a table bearing a sign that said "Hamas is a terrorist group that butchers innocent civilians while Israel is a force for good. Change my mind."

One of the people who argued with Edelman in October 2023 was Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia anti-Israel encampment ringleader who is facing deportation.

"It was pretty simple for me," Edelman said. "All of my guys were called to the war. I never had the honor of serving; I moved to Israel too late. I thought, if all of them are fighting, what can I do to contribute? Because I felt quite useless. The best way I know how is to go and fight rhetorically." ♦



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