

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 22, 2026

Gov. Spanberger disappoints Va. Jewish leaders with appointment of Jim Moran to GMU board

Moran, a former longtime congressman now lobbying for Qatar, has an extensive record of using antisemitic tropes and hostility to Israel

By Matthew Kassel

Days after assuming office, Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger is facing scrutiny from Jewish leaders over her decision to appoint Jim Moran, a former congressman representing northern Virginia now working as a lobbyist for clients including Qatar, to the George Mason University board of visitors, despite his extensive record of using antisemitic tropes and hostility to Israel.

The appointment, which Spanberger announced on Saturday hours after she had been sworn into office, came as part of

a broader leadership shake-up of the state's three public universities—as the Democratic governor seeks to assert her influence in the wake of a Republican administration whose university board oversight she had criticized during the campaign as politically meddlesome.

But her nomination of Moran, whose incendiary rhetoric has long been a subject of controversy, is raising questions about her approach to countering anti-Jewish harassment at public universities such as George Mason, which last July was the

subject of a federal Title VI investigation related to its handling of several high-profile incidents of antisemitism and anti-Israel extremism.

Moran, a Democrat who retired from Congress in 2015, faced widespread criticism as well as calls for his resignation over comments in 2003 in which he blamed the Jewish community for pushing the U.S. into war with Iraq, a remark he reiterated four years later while singling out the pro-Israel group AIPAC.

Even as he has voiced regret for some of

his past remarks, Moran, who is now 80, has downplayed accusations of antisemitism and has continued to echo such rhetoric in recent years while appearing on panel discussions with a London-based NGO led by a former Hamas activist. In one virtual event in 2023, for example, Moran attributed Washington's support for "apartheid" in Gaza to Jewish control of American politics.

"It's about domestic politics and it always has been," Moran insisted. "The majority of people who contribute to the Democratic Party in America have Jewish surnames. Now think about that," he added, arguing that their "principal reason for contributing has been the *sine qua non* of support for Israel, and unqualified support for Israel."

Moran's recent lobbying for the Qatari government, meanwhile, has likewise drawn attention as the Gulf state has increasingly sought to burnish its image in the United States through funding higher education and ongoing outreach to federal lawmakers, among other efforts.

His work has included "outreach on Qatar's higher education funding," according to recent disclosures, pointing to possible conflicts of interest in his board appointment. Qatar, a major non-NATO U.S. ally that has frequently drawn criticism for hosting Hamas, has donated \$5.9 million to George Mason.

Jewish leaders voiced befuddlement over the controversial appointment.

Cookie Hymer Blitz, a Jewish and Democratic activist in Northern Virginia, called Moran's nomination "very concerning, disappointing and surprising."

"His long history of anti-Israel bias and antisemitic comments seem to make his appointment to this board ill-advised at best," she told *Jewish Insider*.

Another prominent Jewish leader, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid antagonizing Spanberger, told JI: "It is concerning to hear of anyone who has shared, or continues to share, antisemitic tropes or messages being appointed to leadership roles. I imagine the vast majority of Virginians would take pause."

The local organized Jewish community is currently weighing a response to Spanberger's decision in order to help raise awareness about Moran's views as he prepares to seek confirmation from the state legislature, where he could face questions about his rhetoric and lobbying, according to a Jewish leader involved in government outreach.

Spanberger's office did not respond to a request for comment from JI on Wednesday regarding the new appointment.

In an email to JI on Wednesday, Moran said that "Qatar has asked only three things of me but they're a prerequisite for representing them: 1) always tell the truth, 2) always obey U.S. law and 3) always do what you feel is right."

George Mason University, he added, "is committed to maintaining a diverse student body where every student feels secure and valued, and it aspires to provide the highest possible quality of educational experience."

As for his opposition to Israel, he called himself "a longtime supporter of Israel's Labor Party, although it's a mere shadow of

its former self." He said he had "shared many meals with" former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and was "confident" that his "views on Israel today specifically and the Middle East in general are wholly consistent with Shimon's worldview."

He did not address his past antisemitic rhetoric, only saying that, "for what it's worth, I'm a subscriber to the *Jewish Insider*."

During the gubernatorial election, Spanberger touted her efforts to combat anti-Jewish prejudice as a former congresswoman and said that working to confront antisemitism in higher education would be "a top priority" for her. "My administration will not tolerate antisemitism in any form," she vowed.

But Kenneth Marcus, a leading expert on antisemitism and the founder and chairman of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, questioned Spanberger's commitment to such pledges as she now moves to elevate Moran to a key role in Virginia's public university system.

Marcus, whose appointment by former Gov. Glenn Youngkin to George Mason's board of advisors was rejected by Democratic lawmakers last year, called the nomination "hardly an auspicious start for Gov. Spanberger."

"Given the lengthy trail of antisemitism accusations that Mr. Moran has faced for a long period of years," Marcus told JI, "it is surprising that Gov. Spanberger has tapped him for leadership at an institution where so many questions have arisen about antisemitism." ♦

Paige Cognetti running in Josh Shapiro's footsteps in key Pa. swing district

The Scranton mayor is championing her support for Israel as she challenges GOP Rep. Rob Bresnahan

By Matthew Kassel

Paige Cognetti, the Democratic mayor of Scranton, Pa., is staking out a pro-Israel platform as she seeks to unseat freshman Rep. Rob Bresnahan (R-PA) in a northeast Pennsylvania swing district, emphasizing her support for continued military aid to the Jewish state in the wake of its war against Hamas in Gaza.

In a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, Cognetti, who is favored to win the Democratic nomination in Pennsylvania's 8th Congressional District, said "the Israel question," as she called it, is "very simple" for her.

"I vehemently support Israel's right to defend itself," she explained, "and would take extremely seriously Congress' role in ensuring they have the military aid that they need to defend themselves in a really dangerous neighborhood."

To underscore her point, Cognetti, who was sworn into her third term as Scranton's mayor earlier this month, touted a local munitions plant that she said continues to produce "the shells that we use for our own defense, but also that we ship to our allies, like Ukraine and Israel."

"We're very proud of that," she said. "It's really important to us in northeastern Pennsylvania that we defend ourselves, defend our military personnel at home and abroad. We're very, very specific and deliberate about how we celebrate our veterans, and we feel the same way about supporting our allies."

Even as some Democratic candidates have turned away from embracing such positions amid growing chilliness toward Israel within the party, Cognetti, for her part, said she did not feel compelled to join their ranks. "I understand that there has been a lot of rhetoric in the last couple of years — and a lot of folks that feel one way or the

other," she observed.

"But there has never been a question, to me, about what the U.S.' role in supporting Israel should be," she said, adding that she "will continue to support Israel as a member of Congress."

In addition to calling for reauthorization of the current 10-year memorandum of understanding between Israel and the United States that is set to expire in 2028, Cognetti also stressed her support for ensuring humanitarian aid "gets to the people who need it" and backed a "diplomatic, two-state solution" to the conflict, which she acknowledged would be a "complicated and hard-fought" effort.

In her primary campaign to challenge Bresnahan, a first-term incumbent endorsed by AIPAC, Cognetti, 45, is seen by Democratic Party officials as well-positioned to win back the seat held by former Rep. Matt Cartwright (D-PA), who fell last cycle after six consecutive terms in one of two upsets in the state that helped Republicans maintain their increasingly narrow House majority.

Now, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee is eyeing the district as one of four possible pickup opportunities in the state, while targeting Bresnahan, 35, as "the poster-child of Washington corruption" due to scrutiny over his multiple stock trades as a congressman, despite a campaign vow to ban the practice among elected officials.

Speaking with JI last week, Cognetti reiterated those accusations, saying Bresnahan was "clearly profiting off of his votes," and boasting of her own record "delivering results and putting an end to the corrupt machine politics that we're far too familiar with here in northeastern Pennsylvania."

Bresnahan's campaign, for its part,

has dismissed Cognetti as a "far-left extremist" who is in favor of open borders and defunding the police. But he may struggle to land those hits as Cognetti casts herself in a moderate light, particularly on sensitive issues relating to Israel and rising antisemitism on the left and right.

Cognetti, who launched her bid last September, has since raised more than \$1.1 million, garnering over \$640,000 in donations last quarter, her campaign recently announced. Cognetti is widely expected to prevail in the May primary, where she is facing Francis McHale, a retired state official. She has also reportedly claimed support from Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, a moderate pro-Israel Democrat.

Larry Ceisler, a public affairs executive based in Pennsylvania who is supporting Cognetti's House bid, called the mayor a "top-tier candidate" with a "great profile" for the swing district. "At one time, I thought Matt Cartwright was a unique candidate to hold that seat, but Paige has really come on over the last several months," he told JI, noting that she "will have the resources she needs to win."

"The fact is Matt Cartwright lost because he was hampered at the top of the ticket," Ceisler added. "Paige will have the opposite as Josh Shapiro has proven to have coattails and Paige is positioned to take advantage of them."

Cognetti, the first woman mayor of Scranton, was elected in 2019 when she ran as an independent and defeated a crowded field in what was then viewed as a rebuke of the local Democratic machine.

During her tenure, Cognetti has spoken up in support of Israel after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, terror attacks and sought to raise awareness about the rise of antisemitism on both sides of the aisle. "There is some really,

really dangerous rhetoric, and we need to call that out," she said, characterizing anti-Jewish prejudice as antithetical to "core American values."

"Of course, here in Pennsylvania, we have a fresh and really horrific example of antisemitism with the arson attack on Gov. Shapiro's home and his family just last year," she told JI. If elected, she added, she hopes to be "part of a coalition that raises the issue of antisemitism and passes any legislation necessary to make sure" the subject "remains in the forefront of people's minds."

Cognetti, who has never visited Israel, said she had signed up for a trip that was canceled in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks but is "looking forward to getting there at some point."

As she mounts her campaign, Cognetti said she is building "a broad coalition across the district" and describes forming "solid relationships" with Jewish community leaders as well as productive talks with "different groups that are focused on Israel."

Democratic Majority for Israel's political arm, which has not announced an

endorsement in the race, "has had positive conversations with" Cognetti and is "keeping a close eye" on the primary, a source familiar with the matter told JI.

Despite internal divisions over Israel now roiling the Democratic Party, Cognetti argued that "some people have let themselves kind of get away from that simple answer, which is, Israel is surrounded by people who do not believe they should exist."

"The United States," she vowed, "has been and will continue to be its most staunch ally."♦

JANUARY 22, 2026

Azrieli Foundation undergoes 'leadership evolution,' brings in outside CEO, expands role of chair

Longtime corporate executive André Beaulieu joins the 27-year-old Canadian grantmaker as it surpasses \$1 billion in allocations

By Nira Dayanim

The article first appeared in JewishPhilanthropy.

In 1989, architect and real estate developer David J. Azrieli established the Azrieli Foundation to fulfill his philanthropic vision of funding initiatives in key areas, including the Jewish community, medical research, arts and culture and Holocaust education. Thirty-seven years later, the organization is now Canada's largest non-corporate public foundation, surpassing \$1 billion in charitable contributions, roughly one-third of which was disbursed in the past two years.

In light of this recent growth, the foundation is undergoing a "leadership evolution," bringing on board its first CEO from outside of the family, former business executive André Beaulieu, and creating a new expanded board chair position for Naomi Azrieli, who has led the foundation for nearly 20 years, the organization announced this week.

Beaulieu comes with a background in corporate leadership, notably an 18-year career at Bell Canada, a telecommunications company, where he spent nearly a decade as senior vice president of corporate services. For the past five years, Beaulieu has served on the Azrieli Foundation's board, also chairing its financial oversight, risk and compliance committee.

After nearly 20 years as CEO, longtime leader Naomi Azrieli, David Azrieli's daughter, will retain her position as the foundation's chair, albeit with greater responsibilities.

As chair, Azrieli told *JewishPhilanthropy* that she plans to focus on opportunities for thought leadership and "shaping the foundation's mission," and strategic priorities.

"I think it's absolutely the right time in terms of the scale and scope of what we're doing," Azrieli said. "And it allows me to really devote myself to articulating

our values and our vision as a world-class philanthropic organization to the public, to really focus on our long-term strategic priorities. So it's a very exciting time. I'm thrilled to have reached this point in our evolution as an organization and in my evolution as a leader."

Azrieli noted that in its first 25 years, the foundation distributed \$100 million. In the decade since, its operations have expanded dramatically, fueled in large part by David Azrieli's decision to leave his entire estate to the foundation following his death in 2014.

Those disbursements have touched both Canada and Israel, where the foundation has given significant gifts to academic institutions, donating \$10 million for an advanced nursing center at the University of Haifa in May and \$50 million to create a neuroscience center at the Weizmann Institute in 2021.

The foundation also gave heavily to emergency campaigns in the wake of

Hamas' Oct. 7 terror attacks. As the Israel-Hamas war dragged on, the organization has focused on supporting mental health and rehabilitation initiatives throughout Israel, Azrieli told eJP.

According to Beaulieu, in the next five to six years, the foundation plans to disburse another \$1 billion. As the foundation continues to grow, streamlining its operations will become more of a priority, he said, adding that he plans to bring a "business management method" to philanthropic work.

"I'm very excited by the fact that we

can use our scale to, of course, respond to emergencies, but also think long-term about our involvement in science and research, about our community involvement, and having reached really a critical mass of activities in Israel — education and health care in particular, but also music and the arts — I think it's also an incredible opportunity, over the next few years to continue building on what we've established in Israel and take it, take it further and deepen our impact," he told eJP.

"We really achieved so much in my 20 years, but now we're actually positioned for

even more. We're positioned to do more in science and health care, more in the arts, and to continue our mission as always in Jewish education and Holocaust education. So you know, the vision is continuity, but not to sort of sit around and do more of the same... We're young in a way, and we have a culture of being entrepreneurial and innovative, as well as very collaborative and strategic. And the type of partnerships that we're developing, and there'll be more and more of that. So watch this space and stay tuned, because there are lots of exciting things that are going to happen," said Azrieli. ♦

JANUARY 21, 2026

J Street hopes to capitalize on growing Democratic frustration with Israel

'There's going to be a new normal,' the progressive Israel advocacy group told JI, as it endorses candidates who call Israel's actions in Gaza a genocide

By Gabby Deutch

Three months after a ceasefire largely ended the fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, the battle over the future of U.S.-Israel relations still rages in Washington. Both the left and the right face an erosion of support for traditionally pro-Israel positions. Amid the upheaval, the progressive Israel advocacy group J Street sees an opportunity: a chance to solidify Democrats' shift away from unconditional support for Israel and its security needs.

J Street is betting that the shift within the Democratic Party reflecting a chillier relationship with the Jewish state — wrought by two years of war in Gaza — is here to stay. At the start of an election year, interviews with J Street's top political official

and its policy chief make clear that the group is eager to create space for Democrats who have taken a more critical approach to Israel, reflecting and reinforcing a shift toward greater distance in the historically close U.S.-Israel alliance.

"There's going to be a new normal," Ilan Goldenberg, J Street's senior vice president and chief policy officer, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview. "There were two years of trauma that, I think, with the return of the hostages and the end of the war, people can finally start processing, but things are not going back."

Following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks, public opinion, particularly on the left, began to shift against Israel during

its aggressive war against Hamas in Gaza. That change was reflected in increased calls from congressional Democrats to place conditions on American security assistance to Israel, a position that a decade ago was largely a fringe idea.

AIPAC has, at least publicly, written off the shift as "noise," noting that American security assistance to Israel remains intact. Earlier this month, Congress voted to approve a State Department funding package that included the expected \$3.3 billion in military aid to Israel.

But J Street's influence in the Democratic Party is growing. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) accepted an endorsement from J Street for the first

time last year. The group now counts every member of House Democratic leadership among its endorsees. (Jeffries has also been endorsed by AIPAC.)

Even though the Gaza war is largely over, J Street doesn't expect the Democratic Party to return to its historic pro-Israel posture. Instead, the group wants to see a permanent shift in how Washington supports Israel militarily, even if its endorsees hold a range of views on that question.

"We're not looking for complete ideological fealty from our endorsees. We just don't ask for that," J Street's vice president of political and digital strategy, Tali deGroot, told JI. "We want to see candidates affirm that U.S. aid to Israel should conform to U.S. law, that Israel's use of our aid should comply with international law and that our aid to Israel shouldn't be viewed as a blank check."

Israel is nearing the end of a 10-year security agreement with the U.S. that provides it \$3.3 billion in annual foreign military financing (FMF), along with \$500 million for cooperative missile-defense programs, though the funding needs to be approved by Congress every year. That memorandum of understanding expires in 2028, and the question hanging over the next MOU is, if the Trump administration comes to a similar agreement with Israel, whether the political will still exist in Congress to appropriate it over another decade.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu surprised even some of his closest backers by telling President Donald Trump last month that he wants to wind down U.S. FMF to Israel as part of a bid to increase Israeli self-sufficiency. Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), a staunch pro-Israel advocate, said he intends to work with Netanyahu to achieve that goal. It's a rare position where Netanyahu and Graham now find themselves aligned with a J Street policy position.

"I agree with Bibi Netanyahu and Lindsey Graham. It's time to wind down the FMF piece of this," Goldenberg said. "It doesn't mean we don't sell Israel weapons. It doesn't mean we don't cooperate on joint research together on things like Iron Dome."

The "exceptional" way that the U.S. treats Israel — particularly Israel being the largest recipient of U.S. FMF — "actually is bad for Israel in that it draws all this extra attention to the relationship," said Goldenberg. Instead, he argued that the U.S. should "put the relationship on normal grounds," meaning withdrawing unconditional support.

"When [other allies] do things we disagree with, we don't go along with that, and don't necessarily give them weapons for that, or necessarily sit in international institutions and defend them when we disagree with their policies," Goldenberg said.

J Street's influence in electoral politics is relatively limited. The group's war chest does not come close to that of rival AIPAC. Save for a handful of races, J Street largely does not play in primaries, although the group is planning to roll out a super PAC this year that is "pretty large," at least by "J Street standards," according to deGroot. On top of that, J Street's policy priorities almost certainly stand no chance of getting adopted during the Trump administration.

And while large Jewish groups like the Jewish Federations of North America and the Anti-Defamation League have deepened their support for Israel since the Oct. 7 attacks, J Street has continued to test the boundaries of just how critical one can be towards the Jewish state while remaining in the Zionist camp. J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami said in August that he would no longer push back when people claim that Israel's actions in Gaza amounted to genocide. "I simply won't defend the indefensible," he wrote. And J Street has endorsed candidates who use the term genocide, like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT).

"That's up to the candidates of how they're going to say it," deGroot said regarding the word "genocide." "We're looking for broad values alignment, and if they are extremely concerned about the situation for Palestinians in Gaza, so are we." ♦

Miriam Adelson, on publicly giving: ‘If I gave my name, others would donate — so we surrendered’

The philanthropist and GOP donor speaks alongside two other U.S.-based Israeli philanthropists, Naty Saidoff and Adam Milstein, at IAC National Summit

By Ayala Or-El

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

HOLLYWOOD, Fla. — At a certain point, Dr. Miriam Adelson, the GOP donor and Jewish philanthropist, determined that making charitable donations openly accomplished more than doing so anonymously, as she had initially done and instinctively wanted to do.

Adelson, one of the richest women in the world following the death of her casino magnate husband, Sheldon Adelson, traced her early desire to make donations anonymously to her modest upbringing in Mandatory Palestine and early Israel, as the daughter of parents who had made *aliyah* from Poland before the Holocaust.

Her father, who owned movie theaters, made a point of inviting soldiers to attend premieres free of charge, while her mother quietly created work for a Holocaust survivor in need. “All my life, I watched my parents helping people,” Adelson said. “I learned the importance of giving in secret.”

That belief stayed with her when she moved to Boston four decades ago and married Sheldon Adelson in 1991. As she became more involved in Jewish communal life, she resisted public recognition for her donations, convinced that anonymity was the purest form of giving.

Her perspective shifted after a conversation with the then-head of Boston’s Jewish federation, who urged her to attach her name to her philanthropy — not for recognition, but for impact. “He told me that if I gave my name, others would donate,” Adelson said. “So we surrendered.”

Over time, she came to understand that visibility could serve a greater purpose, helping inspire others to give.

Jokingly, Adelson, who is worth an estimated \$34.6 billion, added that she had

just turned 80 and, though it might be early, she had already written her will and was “working to give away my money,” adding, after a beat, “it’s a big work.”

Adelson recalled this shift in her thinking during a panel conversation at the Israeli-American Council’s 10th National Summit in Hollywood, Fla., over the weekend. Sitting alongside her were two other U.S.-based Israeli philanthropists, Naty Saidoff and Adam Milstein. All three have been major donors to IAC, with Milstein helping found the organization in 2007 and Saidoff coming on board soon thereafter. The discussion was moderated by Noa Peri Jensch, chief community officer of IAC.

Saidoff, 70, who is also a leading supporter of the advocacy group StandWithUs, similarly said that he had realized the value in making donations publicly.

Knowing Israeli psychology, he believed that in his community, people always want to “one-up” one another and give more, so giving publicly offered his peers something to outdo. “I know my crowd,” he said.

Since 2022, Saidoff has held the controlling stake in Shikun & Binui, a real estate company traded on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. He spoke about growing up in poverty in Israel. “But I didn’t know we were poor,” Saidoff said. “We lived in an abandoned Arab house — me, my mom, my dad, and my grandmother. My grandma was my North Star; from her I learned charity.”

He recalled how his hardworking grandmother would give them everything she had, even though she had so little herself.

Saidoff immigrated to the U.S. for college, married his wife, Debbie, and remained there. He began his career as a diamond dealer and later became an investor. But even before achieving success, he gave as much as he could, just as his grandmother

had taught him.

“When you join a community, what do you do? You join the giving,” he said. “I didn’t have much back then, but when you give, you meet the best people in the world — people you wouldn’t otherwise meet.”

Eighteen years ago, when he helped launch the IAC with other Israelis in the Los Angeles community, he coined a phrase: “I aspire to be a *freier*,” using the Hebrew slang for a “sucker.”

“That became our motto: Just give back. I believe the secret of life is giving,” Saidoff said.

Milstein, 73, co-founded the Adam and Gila Milstein Family Foundation with his wife in 2000. Together, they have donated to dozens of causes. The foundation supports a network of over 200 nonprofit organizations and has facilitated more than 1,000 collaborations among groups aligned with its mission, particularly those related to combating the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel.

Milstein recalled meeting the Adelsons through Birthright Israel and inviting them to IAC gala events several times until they finally attended in 2013. Their involvement marked a turning point for the organization: The Adelsons’ vision and generous support helped expand IAC chapters across the U.S.

In his closing remarks, Saidoff reflected on the deeper meaning of philanthropy in Jewish tradition. “You don’t have ownership of anything in this world,” he said. “The only thing you leave behind is your legacy, your stewardship. Giving gives you fulfillment. All of the impact you put on others’ lives — that is your legacy.”

Disclosure: The Israeli-American Council provided eJewishPhilanthropy’s travel and accommodations.♦

Mississippi's Jewish community rallies after antisemitic arson

Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson has received support from churches and Jews all over the country, and has seen a revival of interest in membership

By Haley Cohen

As the sun went down Friday night, Mississippi's Jewish community packed the pews of Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson to welcome Shabbat.

Aside from the unusual location, the weekend's schedule was typical — Friday evening prayers to bring in Shabbat, followed by a meal and *oneg*; a bat mitzvah service on Saturday morning; Havdalah to conclude Shabbat and Sunday school classes the next day.

But this week, each service was also an act of defiance.

For members of Beth Israel Congregation — the only synagogue in the state's capital city — this was their first Shabbat since an arson attack heavily damaged their place of worship. The suspected arsonist, Stephen Spencer Pittman, 19, admitted to starting the blaze on Jan. 10 due to "the building's Jewish ties," and referred to the institution as the "synagogue of Satan," a historically antisemitic phrase that has been re-popularized by far-right commentator Candace Owens.

Located in a major hub of the Civil Rights Movement, Beth Israel was bombed in 1967 by the Ku Klux Klan over the rabbi's support for racial equality — including providing chaplain services to activists incarcerated for challenging segregated bussing in the state.

Two Torah scrolls were destroyed in last week's fire, and five more were damaged. A Torah that survived the Holocaust, which was kept in a glass case, was unharmed. The congregation's library and administrative office were also destroyed. Synagogue leaders estimate it will take two or three years to rebuild.

But throughout Shabbat services, which

were also attended by Jackson Mayor John Horhn and members of various local churches in a show of solidarity, "the feeling was not sadness, it was joy," Zach Shemper, the congregation's president, told *Jewish Insider*.

"The silver lining of all of this is Jews who weren't members or necessarily active before are coming in and saying they want to be members," said Shemper, adding that 140 families are currently members of Beth Israel, Mississippi's largest synagogue. "Members who left over the years are saying, 'We want to be part of the family again.' So the intent of the [arsonist], everything he intended to happen, it's the exact opposite. The people here in Jackson said not only 'we don't mind the Jews,' but in fact they said, 'We want you here, what can we do to accommodate?'"

On Thursday, the city held an interfaith prayer event at the Thalia Mara Hall in downtown Jackson, an event that had already been planned as a community gathering but was dedicated to prayers for Beth Israel as a response to the fire.

The offer from Northminster Baptist Church to host services indefinitely follows a long-standing relationship between the two houses of worship. In the 1960s while the church was being built, Beth Israel allowed them to hold services in the synagogue. "Here we are 60 years later, they are able to return the favor," said Shemper, adding that "multiple churches have reached out and offered their worship space as our worship space."

Jewish communities near and far have also been quick to step in and offer assistance. B'nai Israel in Hattiesburg — a smaller Mississippi town about 90 miles away — loaned two Torahs and 50 prayer

books. A congregant drove to Memphis to pick up 100 more *siddurim* from another synagogue.

"Really, that's all we need," said Shemper. But Jewish communities haven't stopped there.

A synagogue in New Orleans sponsored the Friday night *oneg* and sent King Cake Challah. Several other congregations have created rebuilding funds.

On Friday, UJA-Federation of New York announced a \$100,000 grant to support recovery and rebuilding. Jackson does not have its own Jewish federation.

"I came out here to be present and responsive on behalf of Jewish Federations of North America, to meet folks on the ground and coordinate resources, including immediate security needs and to support the work ahead so that this community can move forward and Jewish life can continue," Sheila Katz, chief Jewish life officer of JFNA, told JI.

"We covered the cost of some of the immediate security needs here. We'll be physically and emotionally connected with this synagogue for a long time," said Katz, who traveled from Washington to Mississippi.

"[One] of the most impactful things to witness is how excited the synagogue leadership has been about Jews not connected to Jackson who have wanted to be helpful," she continued. "People have offered Torahs, prayer books, food, office space in Mississippi that they offered to give for free. There's a powerful connectedness of the Jewish people. There's a feeling of resiliency, being called to this moment that nobody wants to be called to. They understand that Jewish life is bigger than a building."

"Jewish life in the south in a small town has always been resilient," said Katz.

Abram Orlansky, a 41-year-old lawyer who was born and raised in Jackson and grew up attending Beth Israel, where he remains a member and sends his kids to Hebrew school, echoed a sense of resilience that comes with growing up Jewish in the Bible Belt.

Orlansky's son was the last person to be bar mitzvahed in the now-damaged building, last May.

"We are a smaller congregation than we used to be," said Orlansky, noting that about 215 families belonged to the Reform congregation when his parents joined in the '80s. "[But] community-wide, I'm seeing resilience. Nothing could have energized

Jewish life in Jackson more than this has."

"The main takeaway for our community is that this fellow was trying to snuff out Judaism in Jackson and he has by far had the opposite impact. He wanted us to feel like the other, but the embrace we feel from the wider community speaks to how welcome we really are." ♦

JANUARY 16, 2026

Amy Acton became a household name in Ohio — now, she wants to be governor

Acton, the expected Democratic nominee, was the state's public health director during COVID, a legacy she hopes won't get in the way of her affordability message

By Gabby Deutch

Amy Acton is running for governor of Ohio this November as an outsider: a Democrat challenging 15 years of Republican gubernatorial rule, a medical doctor with no political experience, a "scrappy kid" from Youngstown who experienced homelessness as a child.

But over a three-month period in the spring of 2020, she became a household name across the state. Every night, Ohioans watched Acton, then the statewide health director, in a white lab coat, describing the state's COVID-19 precautions and trying to calm the anxiety people felt at the start of a new pandemic. *The New York Times* called her "the leader we wish we all had." CNN called her "the Buckeye state's version of the straight-talking Dr. Anthony Fauci" — before Fauci became a polarizing figure.

Now Acton is mounting her first political campaign — a bid for governor in a former swing state that has trended redder and redder in recent elections. Acton, perhaps cognizant of the angst that followed

pandemic shutdowns and mask mandates, is not making her COVID-era fame the focal point of her campaign.

In a statement to *Jewish Insider*, Acton said her campaign will focus on one of the most animating issues for voters and politicians alike right now: affordability.

"I'm running for governor because people in my state are struggling with rising costs. There's no breathing room," Acton, who would be Ohio's first Jewish governor if elected, said. "I refuse to look the other way while special interests and bad actors try to take our state backwards on nearly every measure. Everywhere I go, Ohioans are ready for change."

But before she can get to that, Acton has to thread a difficult needle in reminding voters who she is. In the spring of 2020, during the peak of the pandemic, it felt like she was in everyone's living rooms. Acton told the state about her family's virtual Seder that year as she urged religious communities to celebrate the holiday without congregating.

"My matzah ball soup is the best, just saying," Acton said, noting she didn't have time to make it that year.)

"The magic of Amy Acton on those press conferences was her authenticity and her compassion," said Richard Stoff, the founder of Ohio Business Roundtable.

Acton worked with DeWine to make Ohio one of the first states to shut down mid-March 2020. The move earned widespread praise at the time but now puts her in a precarious position politically, as the public health measures that were implemented early in the pandemic have turned into partisan cudgels in the ensuing years.

"Right now, that's not the lead thing in her bio," said Stephen Mockabee, director of the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Cincinnati. "I think that the message that Acton will present is, 'I'm a native Ohioan, and I love the state, that's why I'm running, because I care about the state, and, you know, I have these experiences coming up from humble

beginnings, through medical school in Ohio, working on behalf of the public in the public health capacity. I think that's the story, not just referring specifically to COVID."

"We saw the backlash to COVID, and how that could be a vulnerability for her. But what I've seen is it's a strength. It is a foundation of trust that people have in her," Ohio state Sen. Casey Weinstein told JI. "And if the worst attack against her from the other side is going to be that she fought for our health and fought to keep people out of the hospital and fought to keep us safe and was working hard to bring science and the absolute best she could to keep us and our families healthy, then okay, like, let's have it."

Indeed, Acton doesn't lean into her turn as a pandemic celebrity in her messaging. Her campaign website describes her tough childhood in Youngstown, where she survived an abusive parent and homelessness, even living in a tent for a period. Her official biography tells of how she worked her way through college and medical school, kicking off a career in public health and advocacy. The only reference to COVID is carefully weighed: "When the pandemic hit, her steady leadership and voice for common sense not only saved countless lives but also helped Ohio's economy and schools open earlier than other states," Acton's website declares.

Acton's experience as Ohio health director showed her the personal cost of public life. Protesters regularly picketed her home in the Columbus suburb of Bexley. It was mostly people unhappy with pandemic-related restrictions, although the demonstrations also included a Proud Boys activist and a handful of antisemitic signs.

Ohio state Sen. Casey Weinstein, a Democrat whose district includes Akron, was also facing protesters in front of his family's home as he spoke out against book bans. Acton reached out, and the two developed a friendship. A couple years ago, they reconnected at a Passover Seder hosted at the Ohio statehouse, and Weinstein has helped her campaign in the Cleveland area. (The two were also "celebrity bartenders" at a fundraiser for the Akron JCC last year.)

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Acton stepped down from the role in June 2020, three months into the pandemic. But it wasn't due to the protests, she asserts. It was, as she told an interviewer last month, because she refused to go along with Republican lawmakers who wanted her to give permission to reopen some venues that had been shuttered due to pandemic restrictions.

"That she's running I think takes a lot of guts on her part, because she was a face during COVID that people knew and recognized, and got a lot of negativity, I think unwarranted negativity, but about her role in trying to manage that crisis," said Dan Birdsong, a political scientist at the University of Dayton.

"I could not put my name on orders that, frankly, would have killed people. I have a Hippocratic Oath as a doctor to do no harm," she said. The campaign pitch is in the pivot that comes next — that she is still proud of leading the shutdown charge because it allowed the state to reopen schools and other spaces sooner.

"In Ohio, we flattened the curve. We saved a lot of lives, and we actually got back to work and life sooner because we took swift, decisive action," she said. The key question — aside from whether any Democrat can, in 2026, be a viable statewide candidate in Ohio — is how the public will respond to the pandemic flashbacks that her campaign will inevitably spark.

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The primary hasn't taken place yet, but Acton and her general election opponent — Republican entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who ran for president in 2024 — have each cleared the field in their respective parties. A December poll showed Acton leading Ramaswamy by one point, but experts cautioned that it is too soon to draw any conclusions.

Acton has not made her Jewish faith central to her campaign in the same way that Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro did during his 2022 campaign. But she has long been steeped in the Jewish community, serving on boards like the Columbus JCC, Columbus Jewish Day School and Congregation Beth Tikvah outside Columbus. "My Jewish roots in *tikkun olam* have been a guiding force throughout my career as a public servant and instilled in me the belief that everyone deserves the same chance to get ahead that I had," Acton told JI.

Antisemitism has taken an unusual place in the race, aside from the anti-Jewish hate that Acton faced as health director six years ago. Ramaswamy, the son of Indian immigrants, published an op-ed in *The New York Times* last month calling out the racist, antisemitic "Groyper" movement — conservatives who consider themselves followers of the neo-Nazi influencer Nick Fuentes.

"Conservative leaders should condemn — without hedging — Groyper transgressions," Ramaswamy wrote. "We must practice what we preach: My current Democrat opponent in Ohio is a Jewish woman, and while I criticize her policy record unsparingly, I will be her most vocal defender against antisemitic attacks from left or right."

Ramaswamy struck up a dialogue with Jewish communal leaders in Ohio after the Republican presidential primary ended.

"He's staked out a really powerful position opposing some of the antisemitism and the bigotry on the right wing of the Republican Party. He's gotten hate because of that," said Howie Beigelman, president and CEO of Ohio Jewish Communities, a statewide advocacy group. "I think that both of them have a personal connection to our community, in that sense, understanding

what we're going through and the fears we have."

Acton is not running as an uber-progressive Democrat; she did, after all, get her start in politics working for a Republican governor. That moderate sensibility is likely to help her in Ohio.

She is also hoping to ride the coattails of former Sen. Sherrod Brown, the last Democrat to win statewide in Ohio, as he challenges Sen. John Husted (R-OH), who was appointed to the Senate last year. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said this week that if Democrats hope

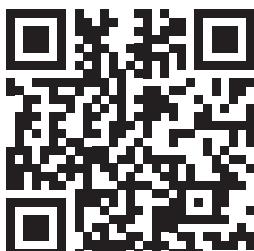
to regain the Senate majority, they'll need to win in Ohio — and Democrats will spend heavily to boost Brown.

"There are coattails there, and so making sure that she's as strong as can be is really important," said Jeff Rusnak, a Democratic strategist in Cleveland.

And whether COVID ultimately proves to be positive or negative for Acton, there's no question her actions during that pandemic earned her some hardcore fans who will be trying to get her across the finish line. Acton's neighbors in Bexley put signs in their yards that read, "DR. AMY ACTON

FAN CLUB," some of which remained well after the pandemic emergency ended. A local apparel company designed shirts in support of Acton that said "Not all heroes wear capes."

"She had this following, and she still has this. I've been with her in public and witnessed this firsthand," Rusnak said. "You could just be sitting at a coffee shop with her, having coffee, and people who she does not know will just walk up to her in tears and thank her, and want to hug her. It's this very strange phenomenon." ♦



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