

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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FEBRUARY 26, 2026

## Democratic governors facing push from Jewish groups to embrace education tax credits

*Gov. Jared Polis of Colorado is the only Dem governor so far to opt into the program; other Dem governors actively considering it*

By Gabby Deutch

At the start of a pivotal campaign cycle, Democratic governors will face a politically high-stakes decision this year on a new education policy that President Donald Trump signed into law last year.

One provision of Republicans' sweeping spending package adopted in 2025 — dubbed the "One Big Beautiful Bill" by Trump — was a measure that provides a dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for people who donate to approved scholarship organizations that can support a range of education expenses, including private school tuition and tutoring.

Individual states must opt in for taxpayers to be eligible for the credit of up to \$1,700 annually.

So far, the policy has been a no-brainer for Republican governors, who already

support school choice programs, to allow parents to receive a federal tax credit to support private schools, including religious schools. Twenty-three states have formally opted in as of last month, and at least two other Republican-led states (Florida and Utah) said they plan to do so.

Democratic governors, skeptical of school choice programs and wary of powerful teachers' unions, face a trickier choice. They have to opt in by the end of the year for taxpayers to be eligible for the credit. The National Education Association urged lawmakers to vote against the bill last year, and has said that "voucher-inspired schemes" like the federal tax credit program "erode public education, the foundation of our democracy." (An NEA spokesperson declined to comment on Wednesday.)

Orthodox Jewish groups have long

supported school choice efforts, including vouchers, while most non-Orthodox groups — including umbrella organizations such as the Jewish federations — sat out those matters in the past or opposed them. Now, Orthodox leaders are being joined by the Jewish Federations of North America as the umbrella group urges Democratic governors to support the bill. The Union for Reform Judaism, which opposed an earlier version of the tax credit that was farther-reaching, ultimately did not come out against the measure.

"We think this should be a priority for the entire Jewish community, to support students, especially in Jewish day schools," said Rabbi A.D. Motzen, national director of government affairs at Agudath Israel, a major Orthodox organization. "I think it's very helpful, because in many of those

blue states, the more governors see that this is a politically wise idea, and that there is widespread support among different faiths, whether it's Catholic clergy or Jewish leaders and business leaders, then it will make it easier for them to opt in."

Marc Baker, CEO of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Boston's Jewish federation, said the tax credit "aligns with CJP's vision to make day school more affordable and accessible for families in Greater Boston," and that he plans to discuss it with Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey, a Democrat.

Part of the pitch that Gil Preuss, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, is making to Democratic leaders in Maryland, Virginia and Washington, is to differentiate the tax credit from more controversial voucher programs.

"I know, particularly for Democratic governors, they place significant value in public education, and we as a Jewish community strongly support public education," said Preuss. "We don't believe it's taking away money from public education, but it is a way for individual households to direct some of their federal taxes."

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis is so far the Democrat who has expressed the most enthusiasm about the tax-credit scholarship program.

"It supports donors to give more money to our schools," Polis said in November. "I mean, I would be crazy not to" opt in. A spokesperson for Polis confirmed in December that he plans to add the state to the program.

North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein, a Democrat, has also said he intends to opt in his state once more information is released from the federal government. "School choice

is good for students and parents," Stein said last year. "I intend to opt North Carolina in so we can invest in the public school students most in need of after school programs, tutoring, and other resources."

A handful of blue-state governors — in Wisconsin, Oregon, New Mexico and Hawaii — have stated they will opt out of the program.

Most Democratic governors, including in states with the largest Jewish communities, are taking a wait-and-see approach, saying they need to see formal regulations from the IRS and the Treasury Department outlining what the funds can be used for and how they can be collected. Activists in the Jewish community working on this issue say they are still in conversation with Democratic governors even though the timeline for implementation is not totally clear.

"The governors that we speak to on a regular basis about this are very clear that they want to see the regulations first, which we don't hold against them. We think that's fair. You don't want to play a game until you see the rules of the game," said Sydney Altfield, CEO of Teach Coalition, a project of the Orthodox Union that advocates for federal funding for nonpublic schools. "We think that in the long run, it will be a positive outcome, but we understand that there's no movement yet."

Rosie Lapowsky, a spokesperson for Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, said his administration "is awaiting federal guidance to address key questions about how this program would work, including which students will be eligible, how this federal initiative will interact with existing programs, and more. We look forward to reviewing that guidance."

A spokesperson for Maryland Gov.

Wes Moore said he has not yet taken a position. Alana Davidson, director of communications at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, told JI that Gov. Healey "is awaiting official guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and Treasury at this time."

Jen Goodman, a spokesperson for Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York, took a swipe at the Trump administration while saying Hochul has not yet made up her mind.

"While this proposal doesn't take effect until 2027, it's surprising that the federal government continues to fail to share any policy details with states," Goodman told JI. "Gov. Hochul is supportive of anything that would help students and schools, but given this administration's record of including poison pills in policies, the state needs to thoroughly review the proposal before making commitments."

Spokespeople for Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, New Jersey Gov. Mikie Sherrill, Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser and Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger did not respond to requests for comment.

Spanberger is in a different position from other Democrats, because her predecessor — Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin — already opted Virginia in last month before he left office, so she would have to formally revoke that permission.

Preuss said his goal at the moment is not necessarily to get area governors in the Washington area to a yes anytime soon, with IRS regulations not likely to come out for a few more months. He just wants to convince them to leave the door open.

"It's very early on," Preuss said. "We mostly want to make sure that governors do not come out against it." ♦

# Democrat John Cappello brings military experience in Israel to race against Mike Lawler

*The Air Force veteran, who served for six years at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, said Israel should continue to make efforts toward peace*

By Marc Rod

Democrat John Cappello, an Air Force veteran, brings experience as a senior U.S. military official in Israel to the crowded race to take on Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY) in New York's 17th Congressional District.

But, entering the race later than most other competitors and lagging behind in fundraising, he has significant ground to make up before the June primary.

Cappello spent six years working as a military official in the U.S. Embassy in Israel, from 2010-2016, first as the Air Force attache and later on missile-defense issues. After his time in the military, Cappello was tapped as a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, before going on to found his own foreign policy-focused groups.

"I always understood, being a student of history and of politics, that the United States' relationship with Israel was a very unique one and a very close one," Cappello said in an interview with *Jewish Insider*. "But to be able to be there to see it and to be part of both nurturing it and building it was an honor."

During his first three years at the embassy, Cappello worked under then-U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro, helping to set up and escort delegations of American military officials and business leaders; in his second three years, he helped run the Missile Defense Agency liaison office.

While in Israel, he also took classes in Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University.

He said he was on the ground in a period in which "the challenges towards Israel were morphing and were changing dramatically" — including an increase in rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel.

Cappello said that the U.S. and the world

need to stop "kicking the can" on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and that the current cycle of "mow[ing] the grass" with a new war every few years is not a viable long-term solution for Israel's prosperity.

But he also acknowledged the concerns in Israel about trying to reach peace, after previous efforts have gone unreciprocated.

"It's complex because the Israelis see it that they've continually extended a hand, continually tried to compromise," Cappello said. "How many times do your neighbors attack you, you defeat them, and then you're still expected to somehow compromise and give back?"

But he said that, with U.S. support, Israel has "never been more powerful" and that there is "room for them to accept risk," but only with a guarantee that the U.S. and the Western world have its back.

He said moving toward peace will require strong leadership on all sides — including an end to Palestinian incitement and hatred against Jews and Israel — and backing from the U.S., the Europeans and the Arab states.

He added that the events of and since Oct. 7, 2023, while tragic, have "opened a door, in a way," with Hamas and Hezbollah weakened, the fall of the Syrian regime and the weakening of the Iranian regime.

"I think the United States needs to play a leadership role, and an aggressive leadership role — not about building hotel complexes and luxury resorts in Gaza, but actually working towards development that will provide the Palestinians the opportunity to live in partnership with their neighbors, because all of the countries in that region can benefit from what the Israelis have done," Cappello argued.

**Cappello rejected the idea of conditioning U.S. aid to Israel and said that, while Israel is "an imperfect democracy" and deserving of criticism for some of the way it handled the war in Gaza, "it is a democracy, it is an important partner."**

"The Israelis have legitimate concerns to defeat an enemy that's bent on destroying it. They also have a responsibility ... to do everything they can to limit civilian casualties," Cappello said.

He said the U.S. should "use our partnership, our leverage, in a way that allows Israel to defend itself, but to do so in a manner that fits the democratic values it espouses." He said that cutting off weapons sales would not reduce conflict because Israel would still need to find ways to defend itself.

He emphasized that Israel does have stringent targeting procedures to limit civilian casualties and that the war in Gaza was a pursuit of "legitimate military goals" but these are complicated by Hamas militants intermingling with civilians.

"The Israelis have legitimate concerns to defeat an enemy that's bent on destroying it. They also have a responsibility ... to do everything they can to limit civilian casualties," he said.

Cappello said that the U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear program sent an important message in punishing the regime for its ballistic missile strikes on Israel and set back nuclear efforts, but did not fulfill the administration's initial claims of fully obliterating the nuclear program.

"The lack of seriousness and planning and strategic foresight, I think, is a real problem," he said.

Cappello also said that it would be “irresponsible” if the U.S. repeatedly promised protesters in Iran that help was on the way, “unless we are really going to back it up.” But he said that any further strikes on Iran need to be based on specific goals and objectives that can be achieved.

**“I’ve talked to a lot of young people, and this topic has come up a couple of times, about Israel, support for Israel. Smart, intelligent young people that have graduated from university — but they have this misguided notion because they’re being fed information. They see it on their feed, this is what they read,” Cappello said.**

“What is the objective here? I don’t know — and so in the absence of knowing, I’m reticent to use military force because it has other ramifications, not the least of which is putting American service members in harm’s way,” he continued. He said other nonmilitary responses include continued and increased sanctions targeting Iranian officials.

He tied the antisemitism crisis in the United States to a failure of leadership —

with leaders failing to call out antisemitism and distortions of history and indulging in antisemitic narratives themselves. He said that education about antisemitism is also critical.

“I’ve talked to a lot of young people, and this topic has come up a couple of times, about Israel, support for Israel. Smart, intelligent young people that have graduated from university — but they have this misguided notion because they’re being fed information. They see it on their feed, this is what they read,” Cappello said.

Asked about New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s record, he said that he “understand[s] the concerns and he has a responsibility to address the things that he said in the past,” adding that he wants to see Mamdani admit mistakes he has made and change.

“Just because the voters voted [for] him doesn’t mean we accept racism or antisemitism or any of those, but, I think he is a work in progress, and let’s see,” Cappello said. “He should be held accountable. He has a responsibility to continue. He said he’s ‘the mayor for everyone’ ... now he’s got to step up.”

Facing a wide field of competitors in the Democratic primary, Cappello argued that his service to the country and experience dealing with national and international challenges would make him a strong leader for the district.

But he also acknowledged that he entered the race later than most other candidates, and that he needs to work to introduce himself to voters. He argued that most voters aren’t paying attention to the race yet, so there is still plenty of time for him to make that outreach.

“The thing that keeps me going, despite the crazy local politics and the disgusting amount of money we have to raise, is when I talk to people, people do want change,” Cappello said. “They want to believe that we can do politics differently.”

Cappello has raised \$53,000 since entering the race and closed out 2025 with just \$20,000 on hand, making his total fundraising haul less than one-fifth of the next closest competitor’s. But several others closed out the quarter with similarly depleted war chests. ♦

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## A new federal tax credit could reduce Jewish day school costs — how does it work?

*By offering rebates for donations to ‘scholarship-granting’ organizations, the program potentially skirts some issues related to school choice and church-and-state separation*

By Nira Dayanim

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

A growing number of Jewish groups are pushing states to adopt a federal tax credit that would relieve some of the financial burden on Jewish day school tuition and other educational costs, while skirting many of the issues related to school choice and church-and-

state separation that those organizations have traditionally opposed. Advocates told eJewishPhilanthropy that the credit could have a “transformative” effect on Jewish day schools, as well as other Jewish education-related initiatives.

The so-called “Education Freedom Tax Credit” was created when the One Big, Beautiful Bill Act, was signed into law in

July and goes into effect next year. Unlike other voucher systems or tax rebates for private school tuition, this indirect federal tax credit would be in exchange for donations to qualified nonprofits that fund scholarships and other “education-related services and products.” Taxpayers will be eligible for a credit of up to \$1,700 on their federal income taxes for donations to these

organizations that offer tuition assistance to public, private or charter schools.

Several Jewish nonprofits have thrown their lobbying weight behind the credit, most recently the Jewish Federations of North America, which lobbied governors to opt into the program over the weekend at the National Governors Association summit. So far, the credit has been adopted by governors of 23 states, almost all of them Republican, though a number of Democratic governors have expressed interest in the program as well.

“It has the potential to be transformative,” Paul Bernstein, founding CEO of Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “If we can mobilize a large part of the Jewish community to take advantage of this tax credit and to direct their giving towards Jewish day schools and yeshivas, then we could be talking about making a real dent in affordability for families.”

The credit is estimated to draw over \$3 billion in funding annually, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, though how much of that would be directed to Jewish Day Schools specifically is unclear.

The credit hinges on the existence of state-approved nonprofit organizations (SGOs), which dispense scholarship funds for any qualified elementary and secondary school expense. SGOs are required to meet several criteria to qualify, including spending 90% of their income on

scholarships to eligible students, namely those from households whose income does not exceed 300% of the area’s median.

According to David Goldfarb, managing director of public policy and strategic health at JFNA, qualified expenses include tuition, tutoring, support for students with disabilities, including occupational and speech therapy, transportation and uniforms, at both public and private schools. “The common one is obviously tuition for Jewish day school, but it’s actually much broader than that,” he told eJP.

Debates over similar legislation have been ongoing for decades in the United States, often centering on school choice, church–state separation, and the risk of drawing funds away from public school systems. On the state-level, there are several programs that allow individuals to fund private schools, through vouchers, education savings accounts and tax-credit scholarships.

According to Goldfarb, in the case of the Education Freedom Tax Credit, the distinction is that the program is federal, and it’s not a direct use of government funds for schools, so the tax incentive does not inherently come at the expense of public schools.

“This is not in the normal sense, literal state government funds being used to fund public schools. This is private money that is attached to a tax incentive to give to a nonprofit that may give scholarships to

individuals attending religious school,” he said.

Bernstein described the credit as having the potential to substantially improve the accessibility of Jewish day schools, as well as bring more private money into education overall. “This isn’t just something that’s accessible to our community. It’s there for public schools. It’s there for other private schools,” he said. “This could be a major investment in education in the United States overall, and allows our community to really, to really seed the path to elevate Jewish day schools.”

According to Goldfarb, while many Jewish organizations are spending the next year preparing for the onset of the credit in 2027, several details remain uncertain, including whether married couples will be able to file for \$1,700 or \$3,400 jointly, clarity on what meets the criteria of “qualified expense” and the degree to which states can influence and control which schools the funds go to.

“We want to make sure that those criteria are objective, non-discriminatory, and comply with all applicable state and federal laws,” said Goldfarb. “A lot of the Democratic governors in particular are waiting on that guidance before they make a determination on how we’re going to move forward. So that guidance is really going to be critical from the IRS.” ♦

# Laura Fine champions pro-Israel record in position paper

*Fine: Israel is 'more than just a strategic ally, it is a beacon of democracy in one of the world's most volatile regions'*

By Marc Rod

Amid attacks from anti-Israel activists and groups over her support for Israel and backing from pro-Israel supporters, Illinois state Sen. Laura Fine, a Democrat running for an open Illinois House seat, unapologetically championed her backing for the Jewish state in a position paper obtained by *Jewish Insider*.

The paper offers an unflinching defense of Fine's positions, including rejecting conditions on U.S. aid to Israel. Fine and other candidates, including Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss and far-left activist Kat Abughazaleh, are set to participate in a televised debate on Wednesday evening.

Fine described Israel in the paper as "more than just a strategic ally, it is a beacon of democracy in one of the world's most volatile regions" with a bilateral relationship "rooted in shared values: democracy, pluralism, innovation, and a mutual commitment to peace and security."

She emphasized that she "fully support[s]" the current U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding on military aid, without "additional conditions ... militarily or otherwise."

"While the U.S. and Israel may not always agree on certain issues, halting or conditioning aid is not the right mechanism to solve our disputes or pressure our key allies," Fine continued.

Fine's stance is largely similar to that expressed by Biss in a position paper he authored early in his campaign and reportedly submitted to AIPAC — when he was seeking support from the pro-Israel group — and released publicly in January, after he had pivoted toward a more hostile stance.

In his original paper, Biss said he would support continued aid to Israel under the MOU, and that he "looks forward to seeing

a renewed, expanded Memorandum of Understanding" in the future, while adding that "all military aid to every nation must be compliant with U.S. law."

Now, Biss supports an offensive weapons ban on Israel and the Block the Bombs Act, which imposes unprecedented restrictions and conditions on U.S. aid to Israel. Most recently, at a candidate forum, Biss went even further, saying he would not support any continued funding for arms to Israel, including the defensive Iron Dome system.

Fine noted in her paper that the current U.S. package of aid includes systems to protect Israeli civilians, as well as supports the U.S.' own industry and national security. She also emphasized the various non-military benefits that the U.S. sees from its relationship with Israel — offering as one example a procedure developed in Israel that treats tremors from Parkinson's disease, which she said her family had directly benefited from.

Addressing the war in Gaza, Fine condemned Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attacks, its use of Palestinians as human shields and its abuse of Israeli hostages, adding that the "devastating war that followed [Oct. 7] has claimed the lives of far too many innocent Palestinian civilians, leaving countless families in heartbreak and grief."

She said that Hamas must disarm and its leaders must be brought to justice, adding that additional aid to Gaza is also critical.

"The United States has an essential role to play — not in dictating outcomes, but in advancing a durable peace through diplomacy, humanitarian support, and partnerships with regional allies," the paper reads. "We must remain clear-eyed about the threats, steadfast in our values, and committed to a future rooted in justice, safety, and hope for all."

She called for the continued pursuit of a

two-state solution and for the resumption of peace talks between the two sides.

She also rejected the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which she said aims to "delegitimize Israel's right to exist" and "undermines" peace by pushing for "economic warfare and the isolation of the Jewish people and the state of Israel."

To address the threats from Iran, Fine called for "strong, diplomatic efforts" to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and to address its ballistic missile program and backing of regional terrorism. "The stakes are too high to tolerate halfway measures," she said.

"Maximum sanctions and economic pressures should be utilized to bring them to the table to fully abandon this program," Fine continued. "If Iran reaches nuclear breakout or intelligence reveals that they intend to share the material and knowledge with terror groups, I support military action as a last resort."

Fine said that any Iranian civilian nuclear program is "too risky," and that a deal must include "maximum inspections" and that the U.S. should aim for "dismantlement of this sector."

The state lawmaker also expressed support for the Abraham Accords, and said she would work in Congress to expand the agreement to include Saudi Arabia and others.

Addressing antisemitism at home, Fine emphasized the need to act against this "grave and worsening issue," highlighting "systemic antisemitism issues" in universities and other institutions.

"Far beyond criticism of Israeli government policy, anti-Jewish narratives and rhetoric are being normalized in ways that are deeply worrisome," Fine said. "It's critical members of Congress be ready to stand up and push back on antisemitism

wherever it is present, even when it is politically inconvenient.”

She said that she has been alarmed, as a parent, to see the spread of “antisemitic propaganda” online, which is making Jewish students afraid.

The paper highlights Fine’s work in the state Senate working to support and protect the Jewish community, a significant population in the district, to enhance connections between Illinois and Israel and to fight legislation that would harm the community. She emphasized that it’s

“important to me to use my position to educate and bring forth policy to lend a voice to the Jewish community.”

“As a proud Jewish woman, the safety, security, and prosperity of the State of Israel are deeply personal issues to me. I grew up in a conservative synagogue, became a Bat Mitzvah in Israel, and my husband and I have raised our children with the values of Tikkun Olam,” Fine said. “The tenets of Judaism provide the foundations of my values and have guided me and my family.”

A poll of the race commissioned by the

*Evanston Roundtable* and conducted by the Democratic firm Public Policy Polling released Tuesday showed Biss in the lead of the race at 24%, followed by Abughazaleh at 17% and Fine at 16%, with 22% of voters undecided.

The relatively close race has fueled concerns among some in the local Jewish community that attacks on Biss, like those recently launched by a super PAC believed to have pro-Israel backing, could help open a lane for the stridently anti-Israel Abughazaleh to win. ♦

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## Atop a Tel Aviv tower, Israeli tech leader Yasmin Lukatz reflects on philanthropy, entrepreneurship

*Lukatz stresses importance of maintaining Israeli tech prowess for economy, diplomacy and to combat antisemitism*

By Judah Ari Gross

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

**O**n the 61st floor of the Sorona Azrieli tower in Tel Aviv, Israeli tech leader and donor Yasmin Lukatz offered a master class of sorts on philanthropy and entrepreneurship last night, charting her time in the Bay Area, her return to Israel in 2014, her efforts to bolster Israel’s tech scene and how she has more purposefully directed her charitable giving in recent years.

Lukatz held this discussion at the TLV Convening, a salon series launched in 2023 by Orfin Ventures founder Adam Finkel. The roughly a dozen attendees were a mix of Americans and Israelis, many of them representing family foundations and investment offices, as well as tech entrepreneurs and philanthropy experts (and one journalist).

Speaking to the group, Lukatz, the daughter of Dr. Miriam Adelson, described her process of developing her own independent philanthropy strategy with help from the Israel office of the

Jewish Funders Network, selecting key areas to focus on, such as technology and gender equality, as well as core values like collaboration and metrics.

Lukatz, 53, the founder and director of Israel Collaboration Network (ICON), which supports the Israeli startup scene, stressed the importance of Israeli technology and innovation not only in the economy but in the country’s diplomacy, particularly in the wake of the Oct. 7 terror attacks.

“Oct. 7 made me realize how important the business connections are for the well-being of the country,” she said. “Because when the country wanted to speak with TikTok, they called us. We introduced them to the CEO of TikTok. We introduced them to the founders of Google. We introduced them to [investor] Peter Thiel. We introduced them to the government relations of Google, of YouTube, to the CEO of YouTube.”

She added: “I think just the fact that we continue to do business globally is a great antidote to antisemitism because once you get to know a person, you understand we’re

not the devil. We’re just great people. We’re talented. We’re good. It becomes harder to hate us.”

While she noted the importance of this kind of public diplomacy work, Lukatz said that she does not currently support any “hasbara” activities, believing the field to be ineffectual, with too many figures and not enough collaboration. “Everybody wants to be the CEO. Everybody knows better than the other person. They got it all wrong. This is why I’m not funding any hasbara efforts... because I think it’s a mess,” she said.

Lukatz also discussed her concerns regarding Israel’s future, particularly as it relates to most of the Israeli Haredi community’s refusal to teach core secular subjects in its schools. “I think what bothers me most is actually the ultra-Orthodox now, that they’re not willing to serve [in the military], but also — something we’re ignoring — that they refuse to study math and English while becoming a bigger chunk of the population. What’s going to happen in 20 years? Our biggest asset now is our

talents, is the brains,” she said.

Lukatz, who earlier in the day spoke in the Knesset about the alliance between the United States and Israel, particularly as it relates to military intelligence and technology, reiterated that this prowess is therefore a national security priority.

“If we don’t think about the future, we’re gonna lose this asset,” she said. “We’re going to have less people starting to learn math, less people graduating, less people becoming engineers, less people going through those elite cyber AI units in the military that form so many great companies today. For some reason, we focus on the short term of joining the military just because the burden now is so painful. But it all starts at school.”

Lukatz, who also works as a venture capitalist, said that her work in the nonprofit space through ICON, which — among other things — incubates new startups, has been critical to her work. “The fact that we did it as a nonprofit, really allowed us a foot in the door in many places that would have never taken part of it. By being a nonprofit you can get things that you can’t buy because you never ask for yourself, you ask for the community and people want to be part of it,” she said.

“We don’t ask people to pay for what we give them, instead we ask them to pay forward. So you got something from an event you came to, all we ask you if somebody approaches you and asks you for help, asks for advice, just be open-minded about it. If you have the time, if you have the means, if you have the way, think positively about helping them,” she said.

Lukatz also noted that she had created an investment fund that supports her nonprofit, which in turn supports the companies she invests in, generating more

income for the fund. “So it’s like a pinwheel,” she said.

As a prominent figure in the Israeli tech scene, Lukatz said that she has also encouraged others in the field, particularly those whose companies have recently had an “exit” and been bought out for large amounts of money, to consider getting more involved in philanthropy. “We hosted a session for them with a group of entrepreneurs, with Sigal [Yaniv Feller] from the Jewish Funders Network,” she said. “We invited them all. Many came with their spouses. It was actually a great night. We have to do another one.”

Asked by *eJewishPhilanthropy* how she aims to both bolster the Israeli tech scene while also ensuring that the opportunity that it represents is offered to Israelis of all backgrounds, Lukatz said her organization does specifically look out for minority applicants and that she is also supporting educational initiatives in the country’s geographic and economic periphery.

“I don’t think we should not help the tech because it creates [economic inequality], I think we should see how the tech can lift other sectors with it as well,” she said.

“We’re also working on a program about English studies in the periphery. I think once you know English, you can teach yourself anything,” Lukatz said. “I think philanthropy should be a greenhouse for many initiatives, that if proven successful at a small scale, should be adopted by the government and run at scale. It is our job to start those experimental new programs.”

In addition to ICON, Lukatz also highlighted other nonprofit endeavors, including a volunteer group Code for Israel, which pairs technology experts with nonprofits, and an initiative that assesses

how well businesses treat their reservist employees, known as Tav Miluim. Both Lukatz and the Adelson family are also major supporters to HaShomer HaChadash, a group that aims to combat agricultural theft, primarily in Israel’s periphery.

While Lukatz discussed her personal philanthropic goals and beliefs, she noted the many lessons that she learned both from her mother and from her stepfather, casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, who died in 2021. This included her focus on collaboration and early-stage involvement.

As a person with self-described “occupational ADHD,” Lukatz said that she is most interested in getting involved philanthropically when her contributions are most valuable. “I personally like to come in at the early stage where every dollar that I give has more significance, every hour that I give has more significance. But that is a preference,” she said.

“I was a board member of the [Oshman] JCC in Palo Alto,” Lukatz recalled. “One day, I said, ‘I want to resign.’ And they asked why. I said, ‘Because we’re really good.’ So they said, ‘Then why are you resigning?!’ I said, ‘Because we’re really good!’ I want to give those hours to somewhere that’s not yet really good. I’ll continue to give money [to the JCC], but I’m not giving my time there anymore.”

While she expressed concern about certain areas in the Jewish world, Lukatz said she was buoyed by the younger generation in Israel.

“What makes me optimistic these days is that I see the younger generation waking up, caring like they haven’t before. The war changed them. I see what they have done, how hard they work now to rebuild the country, how much they care,” she said. ♦

# The cowboy hat-wearing Jewish lawyer running for governor of New Mexico

*Sam Bregman, a Democrat, is running against former Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in the Democratic primary*

By Gabby Deutch

New Mexico gubernatorial candidate Sam Bregman looks the part of an outlaw in the B-roll video on his campaign website, sporting a close-cropped, salt-and-pepper beard and a cowboy hat as he rides a horse through the high desert.

But growing up in suburban Bethesda, Md., Sam Bregman's life was more Beltway establishment than High Plains Drifter.

His father Stan, a lawyer and political activist, was introduced to his wife by Hubert Humphrey, the Minnesota Democratic senator and, later, vice president. But what the younger Bregman took from his father was not politics — rather, it was baseball: Stan Bregman represented the Washington Senators in the 1960s before the baseball team moved to Houston.

The sport, which Bregman played growing up, was what initially brought him to New Mexico. He moved to the state to play baseball at the University of New Mexico, but that dream faded quickly.

“When I first got out to New Mexico, I figured out fairly quickly that I wasn't that good in baseball, perhaps as good as I thought I was at the time, and I ended up not not playing for the University of New Mexico very long,” Bregman told *Jewish Insider* in an interview this month. “I ended up going, my brother and I, moving to a rural area just outside of Albuquerque and raising roping and cutting horses, and loved every bit of it.”

Baseball still lives on in the Bregman family — Bregman's son, Alex, is the star third baseman on the Chicago Cubs, and one of the highest-paid players in Major League Baseball — but Sam Bregman chose to follow his father's lead and become a lawyer, and to get involved in politics.

“I realized I could accomplish good. I was a precinct chairman of the Democratic Party when I was 18 years old in this rural place

where my brother and I moved up to, and it made a big impact on my life in the sense that I realized I could be an advocate and get certain things done for the community,” said Bregman.

Bregman was elected to the Albuquerque City Council in the 1990s, and he introduced the state's first hate crimes ordinance during that time. He spent most of his career as a lawyer in private practice before Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat, tapped him to be district attorney of Bernalillo County, home to Albuquerque, in 2023. He was elected to a full term in 2024.

Now mounting a gubernatorial bid, Bregman will face Deb Haaland, a former congresswoman who served as interior secretary in the Biden administration, in the Democratic primary on June 2. Seeking to win in a state that leans blue but isn't a lock for Democrats, Bregman is positioning himself as a moderate who is focused on kitchen-table issues.

“On the political spectrum, many people call me a moderate. I'm not part of the radical left of our party. It's very frustrating to see the radical left and the radical right. I'm somewhere in the middle who just wants to get things done, to better the quality of life for people, and very policy-oriented,” Bregman said.

But even as a moderate, Bregman is taking aim at Immigrations and Customs Enforcement as the federal agency targets undocumented immigrants across the country, and faces increasing criticism of its heavy-handed tactics.

“People are scared. People don't want this for the future of our country. And I can tell you, I'm someone who is going to push back at every opportunity when this president does things that hurt New Mexicans, and what we're seeing in other

parts of this country is unacceptable,” said Bregman. “Using brutality on our fellow citizens — this is not the America that I see for the future. This is something far more troubling.”

Bregman is a proud member of Albuquerque's small Jewish community. Around 100 years ago, his grandfather fled to Baltimore from Russia.

“He always said the greatest thing his parents ever did for him was to get him to America. I'll never forget that,” Bregman said of his father, who was born in the U.S.

His family's story drives his support for immigrants and his opposition to ICE. Bregman said he was shocked by the “horrific” reports from Minneapolis last month, where federal immigration officials killed two American citizens during protests surrounding immigration enforcement actions in the region.

“It reminds me, quite frankly, of what I've learned in history in the 1930s in Europe. We are seeing people who are being stopped with no reasonable suspicion, probable cause or an arrest warrant, based not on some criminal activity, but based on perhaps the color of their skin or the accent that they have, and asked for no valid reason to show them their papers to prove that they're a United States citizen. That is not the America I grew up in,” said Bregman. “I'm going to stand up and be heard.”

As Bregman travels around the state for his first statewide race, he'll be talking to voters about his record as a prosecutor and an activist in the state Democratic Party. But on the weekends, he still tries to visit the ranch where he used to raise cattle.

“I still try and get up there a couple times a month,” Bregman said, “and try and ride the horse as much as I can.” ♦

# Jewish Democrats alarmed about whether their party will remain welcoming

*Former Democratic Rep. Kathy Manning: 'There is no doubt that we are living through very difficult times for American Jews'*

By Matthew Kassel

The debate over Israel within the Democratic Party has long been a particularly acute source of tension, in the wake of a protracted war in Gaza that deepened internal divisions over America's increasingly contested relationship with one of its closest allies.

Recently, however, many Jewish and pro-Israel Democrats say they have observed a distinct and troubling new shift in that debate, as the range of politically acceptable opinions on Israel has strayed far outside the mainstream, with little pushback from party leaders.

Amid growing claims of Israel committing genocide as settled fact, openly pro-Hamas demonstrations, ongoing efforts to demonize pro-Israel engagement in Democratic primaries and rejections of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, the political atmosphere is raising questions about whether the party is willing to collectively draw red lines around creeping extremism or if it is now accommodating anti-Israel sentiment that until not long ago had been more commonly viewed as off-limits.

While hostility toward Israel has been building for some time over its military assault in Gaza sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attacks, Jewish Democrats warn that the party's acquiescence to its anti-Israel wing risks alienating a core constituency that could have negative consequences in the midterms as well as the upcoming 2028 presidential election.

Their worries have dovetailed with a sharp rise in anti-Israel and antisemitic invective from the right that some Jewish Democrats contend is inseparable from a deeper antipathy that transcends traditional party lines.

"For those of us who care about a strong

U.S-Israel relationship, there is reason to be concerned," said Howard Wolfson, a longtime advisor to former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. "The challenge is profound."

Even as he said that challenge also extends to the right, Wolfson voiced apprehension that in his own party, "there are Democrats thinking of running for president who have said that they won't take money from pro-Israel" political donors "and have thrown around the word genocide" while describing Israel's conduct in Gaza. The Jewish community "has a real problem," he lamented to *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "It is a subject of considerable angst and debate."

Sara Forman, the former executive director of the New York Solidarity Network, an advocacy group that backs pro-Israel Democrats for state and local office, said, "The willingness to accommodate absurd assertions about Israel is a cancer that is spreading unchecked" within "the left ranks of the Democratic coalition" in addition to "factions of the Republican right wing," a dynamic she and others attributed, in part, to the polarizing influence of online algorithms that frequently reward incendiary content.

"Right now," she added, "I hate to say we are in an extremely frustrating situation where the identity of the Democratic Party is being redefined, and where a majority of center-left traditional liberal Jews are left somewhere in the wilderness."

"To me," she concluded, "it's depressing."

"It is very troubling for American Jews that we are even having to have this conversation," Jon Reinish, a Democratic strategist often involved in Jewish and pro-Israel causes, told JI. "Putting aside what one thinks" about Israel, he added, "to see it become a flashpoint in politics feels pretty

shitty, to be sure."

The Jewish state, he told JI last week, "is something that transcends language in a political primary and goes back to something deep within us emotionally, in terms of our family and how we think of our own history."

"In the last presidential election we saw Jews, especially in the suburbs, swing more toward the Republican candidate than they had since" Ronald Reagan in 1980, Reinish noted. "If I'm Democratic leadership, I would be looking very closely at that."

Over just the past few weeks, the scope of tolerable views on Israel has slid into markedly antagonistic territory, according to interviews with more than a dozen Jewish and pro-Israel Democrats who voiced a growing sense of alarm over the party's direction.

Earlier this month, for instance, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) used her first appearance at the Munich Security Conference to not only repeat calls for conditioning U.S. aid to Israel but also to suggest that such support had enabled a genocide in Gaza. Though her comments were not new, that she had made them on one of the world's most high-profile foreign policy stages underscored how her positions are continuing to gain greater currency in the party.

Some observers were also unnerved by Ocasio-Cortez's decision to level an accusation toward Israel of genocide while in Germany, seen as insensitive to the history of the Holocaust.

Jewish Democrats say they have been unsettled by the growing ease with which anti-Israel critics have invoked charged claims of genocide without understanding its meaning or historical significance. "The genocide conversation," according to Steve

Fulop, the former mayor of Jersey City who now leads the Partnership for New York City, an influential business advocacy group, “has unfortunately monopolized the left and has become more commonplace and accepted.”

Fulop, a grandson of Holocaust survivors, said the issue was not a major focus of conversation when he ran an unsuccessful primary campaign for governor of New Jersey last year. “In the last six months,” he told JI last week, “it has become more prevalent and more of a talking point.”

This month, the subject emerged in a special election for a House seat in a wealthy northern New Jersey suburb, where a far-left candidate, Analilia Mejia, clinched the Democratic nomination — beating a former congressman, Tom Malinowski, who had faced outside spending from AIPAC due to his support for conditioning aid to Israel.

While AIPAC drew widespread backlash for its role seen as unwittingly helping to elevate a harsher critic of Israel to the House in Mejia, many pro-Israel Democratic elected officials in the state have since coalesced behind the nominee, suggesting her staunchly anti-Israel views are little impediment to winning the party’s broad support. In addition to accusing Israel of genocide, the only candidate in the primary to do so, Mejia, a progressive activist, denounced Israel after the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks without mentioning Hamas and expressed “incredible discomfort” with Israel’s existence as a Jewish state.

Even as Malinowski, for his part, disagreed with Mejia’s anti-Zionist sentiments, he echoed other Democrats who chose to endorse Mejia in the April special general election because, he wrote last week, he “strongly” believes that the “seat must remain in Democratic hands.”

Speaking broadly about anti-Israel currents now shaping the party, one Jewish Democratic member of the House said they have been unnerved by what they called an “obsession” with Israel among many far-left activists and candidates that reflects “litmus tests” not evenly applied to other key foreign policy issues.

“The line of what’s acceptable has shifted massively, especially since Oct. 7,” the House member, granted anonymity to speak candidly about the party, told JI last week.

**“What I’m watching right now, in 2026, is a breakdown in respectful language toward the Jewish community,” Joel Rubin, a progressive strategist and former State Department official, explained in an interview with JI last week. “It is very troubling and implies hostility that is undeserved — considering nobody should be treated to that kind of language. But it is also really dangerous for the Democratic Party and our electoral prospects to have this internal hostility and disunity.”**

In New York City, which elected a fierce critic of Israel as mayor last November, Jewish Democrats say that line has moved in a particularly troubling direction. More recently, for example, Brad Lander, a former city comptroller now challenging Rep. Dan Goldman (D-NY) in a heavily Jewish House district, drew scrutiny for hiring a campaign consultant who had boosted antisemitic conspiracy theories using a pseudonymous X account that also celebrated Iran and Hamas, among other controversial social media posts.

Even as Lander fired the consultant, Kaif Gilani, after his online activity was uncovered by JI earlier this month, the episode still fueled questions about whether he was adequately vetted, given that the consultant had established a profile as a well-known promoter of New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani during the recent election. It also underscored just how common such extremism has now become in New York City — where protesters have in recent months openly chanted their support for Hamas outside synagogues.

Meanwhile, leading progressive lawmakers such as Ocasio-Cortez and Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA), both of whom are seen as potential presidential contenders, have avoided publicly distancing themselves from a popular far-left streamer, Hasan Piker, who recently sided with Hamas while sharing his views on one of those protests, near a synagogue in Queens hosting an event promoting Israeli real estate investment.

Joel Rubin, a progressive strategist and former State Department official now at work on a book about Democratic foreign policy, said he interprets such rhetoric as

part of a broader “political tactic by some folks in the base to try to silence Jewish voices and to intimidate them into not advocating on these issues.”

“What I’m watching right now, in 2026, is a breakdown in respectful language toward the Jewish community,” he explained in an interview with JI last week. “It is very troubling and implies hostility that is undeserved — considering nobody should be treated to that kind of language. But it is also really dangerous for the Democratic Party and our electoral prospects to have this internal hostility and disunity.”

**“There has always been this struggle within the Democratic Party of the argument, on every issue, of what is acceptable and what is not,” Sam Lauter, a political consultant and pro-Israel activist in the Bay Area, told JI. “With regard to Israel, that argument is not new, but what is new is how much it’s increased and what has become acceptable and what has been just dismissed.”**

The increasingly charged tenor of conversation around Israel “is not the way Democrats should be thinking about communicating to voters if we want to win elections outside of deep blue areas,” Rubin suggested. “My biggest fear is that people are afraid to stand up and speak out.”

Kenneth Baer, a former Obama administration official who now directs a communications firm, sounded a similar note of caution. “Democrats are running to outdo each other to criticize Israel to curry favor with the massively online left and the interest groups that constitute the party,” he told JI recently. “The political dynamics of 2026 may mean this doesn’t matter in November, but in 2028 and beyond, running to the extremes is not a political winner.”

“There has always been this struggle within the Democratic Party of the argument, on every issue, of what is acceptable and what is not,” Sam Lauter, a political consultant and pro-Israel activist in the Bay Area, told JI. “With regard to Israel, that argument is not new, but what is new is how much it’s increased and what has become acceptable and what has been just dismissed.”

Still, he argued, pro-Israel Democrats have also “missed out” on the opportunity to forcefully defend their positions. “It has been very clear for years that people who disagree with us have been organizing at a grassroots level while building up support and making their viewpoint a part of the party mainstream,” he said. “And our community stopped engaging at that level years ago, which is why many of us have been screaming that this is a huge problem.”

Former Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY), who previously helmed the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, attributed the changing landscape in large part to what he views as a demographic shift driven by younger voters “generations away from romantic images of Israel” that are now “replaced by algorithm-fueled social media portraying Israel dropping bombs on schools and hospitals in Gaza.”

“In politics, perception is reality, and the reality for younger people is that Israel is wrong,” he told JI.

But he said it would be a miscalculation to disengage from that conversation. “Pro-Israel activists who don’t understand the need to push back proceed at their own peril,” he said. “You can’t surrender the narrative, which means supporters of Israel on both sides of the aisle need to find a much more effective narrative, particularly toward young voters.”

Many pro-Israel activists are at a loss, however, for how to recapture the debate, as Middle East policy now appears likely to be a focus of the next presidential election.

“It’s easy to observe a problem and then not have specific ideas on the solution,” Israel told JI. “That is a fundamental question now.”

“I don’t have a great answer, to be honest with you,” said Wolfson, the Bloomberg

advisor. “I find it is far easier to identify the breadth of the problem than to identify a solution.”

According to Lauter, “the Overton Window has shifted” for Democrats, “and what needs to also shift is our community’s understanding of how to deal with it and approach it.”

“Let’s see how the midterms go and which candidates jump in,” said Aaron Keyak, the deputy special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism in the Biden administration who now serves on the board of Combat Antisemitism Movement. “But in the lead-up to 2028,” he told JI, “the Middle East policy discussion will certainly be more prominent.”

“Regardless of what we think or say today, the particular policy conversation leading up to 2028 is going to be driven by the candidates, so until we can fill out the answer to the ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions, we need to be able to answer the ‘who’ one,” Keyak added.

In the meantime, said former Rep. Kathy Manning (D-NC), who is now the board chair of Democratic Majority for Israel, the party still boasts a number of pro-Israel elected officials as well as candidates, including some her group recently announced it is endorsing in a range of contested House primaries.

“There is no doubt that we are living through very difficult times for American Jews,” she told JI in a recent interview, pointing to what she described as “unprecedented condemnation” of the U.S. alliance with Israel from both sides of the aisle. “What gives me hope,” she said, “is I know from my experience campaigning in a purple state in a competitive seat that the vast majority of Democrats still believe that Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish

state and has the right to defend itself and its people.”

**“We don’t have to love Israel,” but voters should understand the strategic benefits of working with a key Middle East ally, Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic strategist in New York City, said. “It ain’t about Jews,” he told JI. “It’s about the future of the United States of America.”**

As the midterms near, Manning maintained that nominating pro-Israel Democrats will be a crucial step toward reclaiming the House. “The seats that are going to make the difference to taking back the majority are seats where candidates have to appeal not just to Democrats but also to independents and Republicans,” she said. “I think that it’s important for us to understand where voters are, regardless of what the loudest voices online or on the stage might be saying.”

Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic strategist in New York City, agreed with that sentiment, arguing that pro-Israel party members should be seeking to push the debate “back to the middle” and pressing a “straightforward geopolitical argument” to highlight the advantages of the U.S.-Israel relationship rather than relying on expenditures that have proven to be divisive in primaries.

“We don’t have to love Israel,” but voters should understand the strategic benefits of working with a key Middle East ally, Sheinkopf said. “It ain’t about Jews,” he told JI. “It’s about the future of the United States of America.” ♦



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