

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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APRIL 15, 2026

'I dig it': Graham Platner praised Hamas tactics in 2014 graphic video of killing Israeli soldiers

Platner, in Reddit post on Hamas terrorist attack: 'From a strictly professional standpoint, this was a damn fine looking and successful raid against a superior opponent'

By Marc Rod

Maine Senate candidate Graham Platner repeatedly praised the tactics used by Hamas terrorists in comments made about a graphic video of a Hamas raid into Israel in 2014, in which terrorists killed at least five Israeli soldiers.

In archived posts from his now-deleted Reddit profile under the username "P-Hustle," Platner commented on a video post titled "Helmet Footage from Hamas cross-border raid," which showed the attack on multiple Israeli soldiers.

The original video, also now deleted but still archived, was posted by a YouTube channel called *Sabah* on July 29, 2014, with the description, "Secret footage shows the storming of a settlement by the Qassam Brigades and the killing of 10 soldiers." The description and comments in the Reddit thread appear to match a raid by Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades on a military base near Kibbutz Nahal Oz the day prior.

According to a text description of the video and the raid shared online, the video includes footage of the shootings of several Israeli soldiers, at least one of whom is

screaming as the terrorists attempt to kidnap him.

"Looks like an all around well executed and successful small unit raid to me," Platner wrote in 2014 on the Reddit forum r/CombatFootage, a discussion board for footage and photographs of past and current armed conflicts.

Responding to another user who criticized the "execution" of the Israeli soldiers and emphasized that the attack would lead to heavy reprisals in Gaza, Platner said he was not interested in discussing the geopolitical or strategic implications, but suggested Hamas' tactics and actions were reasonable.

"As for your aversion to 'execution', a small unit raid tends to be used to inflict casualties and take prisoners in a short period of time," Platner wrote. "Pragmatically I have little problem with killing an enemy combatant who you attempt to capture but for whatever reason cannot. From a strictly professional standpoint, this was a damn fine looking and successful raid against a superior opponent, I dig it."

He acknowledged, in response to another user, that the terrorists' actions were brutal and that the terrorists should have shot one of the soldiers instead of beating him to death.

Responding to another user who disputed Platner's characterization of the Hamas attack as a "raid" and said that the attack was "not resistance its just drawing blood to score imaginative points in the war," Platner suggested the Hamas terrorists were preferable to those who attacked U.S. forces in Iraq.

"It was Iraq, and those guys were in civilian clothing with silenced weapons. This videos shows a unit of men in full uniform assaulting uniformed military personnel of an enemy their organization is currently engaged in military operations with. There is no comparing the two," Platner wrote. "Generally you try to catch the enemy off guard, and kill them with the least resistance. This looks like a pretty audacious plan that worked, and I'll certainly give credit where credit is due, no matter who they are fighting for."

Platner's campaign did not return a request for comment.

Platner has come under fire by Gov. Janet Mills, who is his main competitor in the Democratic primary, and by Republic-

ans for other past Reddit posts under the "P-Hustle" username which have disparaged a wide range of groups and included various offensive comments.

He also has faced scrutiny for his criticism of Israel and a tattoo on his chest of an apparent Nazi symbol. ♦

APRIL 10, 2026

Photographer Bill Aron on capturing, and donating, decades of images documenting Jewish life

The Jewish sociologist and street photographer recently gifted 417 exhibition-quality prints, 2,765 work prints and 158,000 negatives to the American Jewish Historical Society

By **Nira Dayanim**

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Bill Aron, the Jewish sociologist and street photographer known for his images of Jewish life throughout the 1970s and 1980s, is not a philanthropist. At least not in the traditional sense.

But earlier this year, he donated his work — a collection of 417 exhibition-quality prints, 2,765 work prints, 158,000 negatives, and personal essays and publications documenting decades of Jewish life — to the American Jewish Historical Society, a gift that is potentially worth millions of dollars. Several dozen of these prints are on view at the Center for Jewish History through early June in an exhibition titled "The World in Front of Me," its walls painted black to evoke a roll of film.

It's not uncommon for photographers to donate their art to archives or museums. Many do, hoping for their work to live on in perpetuity, either displayed for new audiences or as a primary source for researchers seeking to understand a particular historical moment. But many of the photographs Aron created, and now donated, are pieces of Jewish history seen by few others. In 1978, he documented the small remaining Jewish community in Cuba, operating under state-enforced atheism. In 1981, he photographed the Jewish community living behind the Iron Curtain, where his fanny pack of film was nearly confiscated by the KGB on his way out of the country.

In the United States, Aron's lens also turned to the Havurah movement, a intercultural Jewish revival in the 1960s and '70s composed of small, lay-led communities that emphasized egalitarianism and active participation, alongside his portraits of Holocaust survivors, Jews in the Deep South and Jewish New York.

Last month, Aron spoke with *eJewishPhilanthropy* about his donation, the Havurah movement and what makes a Jewish photograph.

Nira Dayanim: *Why did you decide to donate your collection to the American Jewish Historical Society?*

Bill Aron: I was encouraged to do something about my work by Bernie Pucker from the Pucker Gallery, and to look around at photography archives. At the same time, a friend, Riv-Ellen Prell, works with AJHS, and she suggested that I consider them. And Melanie Myers wrote me a very nice email, and it occurred to me that in a photography archive, I would just be in an archive, but at AJHS, the photographs, my images, will have a good chance to be used. Someone may be doing research, for instance, on the New York Havurah or the Havurah movement of the '60s and '70s in general, and they'll do a keyword search for Havurah and not only will they get the articles and all the text they want, but my images will also pop up, so it gives me a little reassurance that after I'm not here, my images will still be seen and be used.

ND: *So more than art, you want them to be history?*

BA: Well, history might be a broader term, but yes, seen as art and as historical documents. I know several places that I photographed where nobody else was, the Havurah being one of them. That's why that came to mind. But I hope, as they come up in a textual context or historical context, that people will also see them as art, right?

ND: *Your work has taken you to Jewish communities around the world — including the Deep South, behind the Iron Curtain, and in Cuba, many of which were rarely photographed at the time because of political constraints. Were there any Jewish communities in the 1970s and '80s, or even today, that you wanted to document but didn't or haven't yet?*

BA: Oh, another tough question. I mean, after having had two retrospectives, I'm faced with the opportunity, but also the quandary of what to do with the rest of my life. So where would I like to photograph? One of the things that has intrigued me is that I've had a physical therapist, a beautiful woman, very talented in her art, who has helped me a lot. And through a conversation, it became apparent that she was trans. And so we began talking about that. I've known trans people. A few children of friends of mine are trans. I've known gay people, but I've never been inside that world. And what I like to do is step inside where I'm photographing and try to see it

from not only my perspective, but from the subject's perspective.

When I was doing my series on Holocaust survivors, and I would visit people in their homes, if they didn't ask me if I'd like something to drink or a cup of tea within the first 5-10 minutes, I would ask them for a cup of tea, because that would preclude going right to the photography. And so we would have a chance to talk, and I mean, I feel the outgrowth of our conversation, they also became participants in how the photograph developed and how the photography developed and was done. And so I have talked with my therapist about the community and about the possibilities of going into that community to photograph. That would take me a little more broadly than the Jewish community, but I believe she is Jewish, so that would be a part of it, and I certainly would focus on that, where I found it. So that's what intrigues me right now. I'm not sure how it would develop. I hope it does.

In my life, though, I have to emphasize that I want to have fun with my art. I love photographing, I love that feeling of my camera in front of my face. I came of age photographically in the heyday of the street photography movement, and New York was the major place where it was, where I lived at the time, and that ethos was not to be an intruder, but to photograph from a distance so people didn't know. I just thought that was silly, because they're going to know the camera's there. Ninety-nine percent of the people know it's there, and they react accordingly. So why not use it as a vehicle to help reveal or to help the people reveal who they really are?

ND: *Much of your work intersected with Jewish communities supported by philanthropy, particularly during your visit to the Soviet Union. At the time, how aware were you of the potential impact of your photography, and what influence, if any, do you think it ultimately had?*

BA: I was not aware. I mean, I was doing what I love to do. I would say, in the last 10 years, there was an idea growing that I should do something with the work that I have so that it just doesn't die with me. As I began to think about my work as a succession of the people who came after the

Second World War and developed what we call modern-era photography, I realized that I had a place in that history. So it's only then that I began to think of my work and in the way that you asked. When I began to organize my archive, a very good friend of mine began to challenge me to put together a booklet for the surviving members of the Havurah [movement]. And as I began to do that, I realized that nobody else had photographed the Havurah, that these were really unique images, not only artistically... well in photography, most of the people I know don't refer to their work as artistic, but rather as "strong photographs," but only in having that challenge, and as I was putting together this booklet, I began to think of my work as having a unique place, and not only in the history of photography, but in the history of the Jewish people.

ND: *So you also mentioned in the interview series you did through AJHS, the complexity of photographing Jewish ritual practice, and how at many moments you made the decision to photograph, even when a community might have felt some friction with that decision. Beyond religious rituals, are there other aspects of the Jewish experience that rarely get documented, but you think are essential to understanding Jewish life?*

BA: When I first started, I was very taken by photographing Jews who looked like Jews, the Hasidim, the Modern Orthodox people with kippahs. Then, after a while, I began to feel that, well, I don't look like those people, but I'm Jewish, so where's my place in the pantheon, so to speak, of the Jewish people? So I began to look for ways to make Jewish photographs without having obvious symbols of Judaism in the photographs. Very hard, not always successful. For instance, from when I was in the Havurah I have a whole series of pictures of people smoking joints. Is that a Jewish photograph or not? It's a challenge.

ND: *You also had the unique opportunity to capture Jewish communities or subjects over time. I'm wondering, also looking back, if there's any subjects that you returned to years later that felt fundamentally different from your earlier visits.*

BA: I found the Havurah extremely meaningful. It changed the way I practice Judaism. Basically the leaders of the Havurah

movement were sort of Camp Ramah-based. And at camp, they were pushed to and challenged to observe Judaism in an aesthetically beautiful and meaningful way, rather than just standing up and by rote, saying the prayers. And they brought that into and started the Havurah movement, saying synagogues weren't expressing what we were feeling and what we wanted to feel and to do. The Havurah changed how I thought about being Jewish, basically. I was just in Boston visiting with former members of the Havurah, and we all talked about how after 1980 we spent the rest of our lives looking for a place to have that kind of experience and not finding it. So some of what you ask, I think I would approach from a sadness. Perhaps even some of the children, they also have felt that lack in their lives, of not being able to find a place to continue to practice Judaism in that kind of meaningful way. So I look at it as a change in American Judaism that had a brief generational moment. Certainly, although I found meaning here in Los Angeles, I haven't found that kind of experience.

ND: *Outside of your own work, what is your favorite photograph, and which of your own photographs do you like best?*

BA: I did some research, and I've put together a slide lecture on the role of Jewish photographers in developing modern post-World War II photography. Many of them were Jewish. In fact, one of the major people, Garry Winogrand, because so many of his fellow photographers were Jewish, it led him to famously remark that to be a great photographer, you have to be Jewish. He was joking, but in putting together that slide presentation, there are two photographs that I absolutely adore by a photographer named George Krause. One is of an African American boy standing under a waterfall, with water over his face and the light... I mean, this photographer is unbelievably sensitive to, and a genius with, light, and the light is hitting the water in such a way that it makes it feel like he's looking through a glass cover. And there's another photograph of an old woman, I believe he took it in Mexico City. She was walking along with a cane, and it's a low sun, because the setting sun, or a rising sun,

is hitting her in such a way. So there's this giant shadow on the wall just in front of her, but the shadow is in the shape of a dragon because of, you know, the way her body is shaped.

So I called him up. I wanted to include it, and... this is a long-winded answer, but I wanted to include him. And I asked him if he was Jewish without telling him why. We talked a little about photography. He's in Philadelphia, I'm from Philadelphia, and I said, "Oh, listen, by the way, are you Jewish?" And he says, "Wow, it's interesting you say that because I just got a letter from my dad telling me that his grandmother was Jewish." So I decided that was permission enough, and I do include him, but there are other photographs that I love and admire, but if I could have two to hang on my wall, those would be it.

My own photographs. I have this one photograph that has almost never been seen, and it's in the New York exhibition. It's the protest of [PLO leader Yasser] Arafat's visit to the U.N., [in 1974] and it takes place in the U.N. Plaza. And when he came he was wearing his gun on his hip, and the Jewish community was just outraged that he was addressing the General Assembly. So there was a big demonstration called for the plaza by the U.N. I guess I hadn't been doing this long enough, I couldn't get a press pass to be up by the podium and where all the speeches were. So I'm wandering around, and I find an open office building. The plaza is like a valley. There are two tall buildings on both sides of it. So I wandered up to the roof, and I looked down, and at first, all I could see were the tops of trees. It was the fall, and there are some old leaves there, dying leaves hanging from the trees sporadically. But all I could see were these few leaves and the twigs of the trees, the bare twigs. And then I looked through and I saw the people underneath. In the photograph, flattening it to a two-dimensional frame, you have to really look at the photograph to see the people, and when you do, it's a totally different experience. In fact, my 8-

year-old grandson, he went through the exhibit in New York with his dad pretty carefully, and he just fell in love with that picture and asked for a copy. But you have to look at it, and that's probably my favorite image. My best-known images [are] of the scribe on the Lower East Side of New York.

ND: *How do you think being Jewish impacted the way you captured the Jewish community?*

BA: That's a good question. That's a great question, which I'm not sure I can answer. The early photographers post-World War II, in the '60s and '70s, were photographers who cloaked their Judaism, largely because I think they just wanted to be seen as Americans. In fact, one of them remarked, "We're not Jewish, we're leftist," and so one of the questions I try and address in this lecture is, "Was there really a Jewish consciousness behind the creation of their art?" And it's a tough question. A lot of these photographers focused on questions of social justice, equality, I think for myself, it's become, what I love to do. My first serious photographs were on the Lower East Side of New York. I was introduced there by Misha Avramoff, a fellow Havurah member. He had started this organization to work with the Jewish elderly poor on the Lower East Side, it being the first area of immigration for Jews. And something just clicked. I'd go around with him, sometimes by myself, visiting the elderly poor there, and I just felt like it was the thing that I had to do. I'm sure it has to do with the way I was raised, the deaths of my parents, the move from a Conservative to a Reform synagogue. I'm sure all that plays a part, but an articulation of that I cannot come up with. Sorry, I'd love to be able to tell you something erudite and brilliant, but it's just not there.

ND: *The last question that I always like to ask is if there's anything I didn't ask.*

BA: Well it's been delightful talking to you and it's always a pleasure to make me think about what it is that I do, and I like that challenge, so I appreciate that.

... Oh, you didn't ask me about my first camera.

ND: *By all means.*

BA: This presaged my entire life. I was 9 years old. Just after my dad died, my mom took me to Atlantic City because she thought that would cheer me up. And she was talking to some friends. There's a big boardwalk in... — you know Philadelphia, so you must know Atlantic City. And I was free to walk, and I walked down a ways, and I came across Steel Pier, and I walked into the pier, and it's like an arcade. As soon as I walked in, there was this huge roulette wheel off to the right, and it cost a nickel for a chance, and I had a nickel in my pocket. I put it on No. 48, and the roulette wheel landed on 48, and the guy was kind of annoyed, but he had to deal with it. And he looked at me, I'm a kid, and he went to take down one of the huge stuffed teddy bears from the top shelf. And I said, "I don't want that." And he sort of growled at me, "Oh what do you want?" And I looked around, and there was one, and only one, Brownie Hawkeye camera kit. I want that. And that was the start of a beautiful relationship.

Took me a while, though, for me to figure out that I really could be a photographer. I mean, I just wasn't raised with the idea that I could do that and that that could be a profession. So it took me a while to get there and to figure out that I could really do what I wanted to do.

ND: *You've got to be a photographer-doctor-lawyer.*

BA: My mom was a doctor-lawyer, without the photographer. I remember the first time somebody asked me what I do after I said, "OK, I'm dropping sociology, and I'm going to do this seriously." I said, "Well, I used to be a sociologist, I'm a sociophotographer" back and forth between sociology and photography. So I finally got out "photographer," this was in the office of Project Ezra, on the Lower East Side, a place I worked, and a friend of mine who was in the office just burst out into the biggest laughter.

APRIL 16, 2026

D.C. mayoral candidate Kenyan McDuffie courts Jewish voters as DSA-endorsed rival struggles

'I didn't seek, nor would I accept, the endorsement of Democratic Socialists of America,' McDuffie told JI in an interview

By Gabby Deutch

As Washington, D.C., voters get ready to elect their first new mayor in more than a decade, the two leading candidates — former colleagues on the Council of the District of Columbia — are proposing drastically different visions for the city's future: political moderation or democratic socialism.

In an interview with *Jewish Insider* this week at his campaign headquarters in Northeast Washington, former Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie drew a direct contrast between his campaign and that of his Democratic Socialists of America-endorsed rival, Janeese Lewis George.

"I didn't seek, nor would I accept, the endorsement of Democratic Socialists of America, or any organization, for that matter, that requires some sort of divisive pledge to exclude people that are a part of the fabric of the community of the District of Columbia," McDuffie said.

He was referring to a DSA endorsement questionnaire that asked candidates not to engage with "the Israeli government or Zionist lobby groups." Lewis George, a longtime DSA member, vowed not to attend events that promote Zionism when she filled out the questionnaire, which earned her the DSA endorsement.

Lewis George's responses sparked concern among many in the Jewish community, and she apologized in a closed-door meeting with rabbis in March. But she has not offered any public remorse.

"I think it's important for elected officials to have the courage to say in public things that they say in private," McDuffie said. "Any message that depends on taking a pledge to exclude entire communities as a condition of a political endorsement is extraordinarily divisive and disturbing."

Amid the controversy surrounding her DSA questionnaire and the meeting with

rabbis, Lewis George released a statement last month pledging to stand firm in both her opposition to antisemitism and her support for "Palestinian human rights." McDuffie told JI that he did not see the mayoral race as a place to litigate debates about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I think a mayor's responsibility is to look out for all of its residents, particularly our most vulnerable residents," said McDuffie. "At a time where the Jewish community is seeing rising antisemitism worldwide, and even the District of Columbia, it's important that they understand that their elected officials are going to use every tool possible to protect them."

"I didn't bring those issues into this race. My opponent did it when she sought the endorsement of Democratic Socialists of America," McDuffie said. "I'm not running for Congress. I'm not engaging in the crafting of foreign policy. I'm running for mayor of Washington, D.C., the most beautifully diverse city in America, and I'm running to fight and deliver for all D.C."

McDuffie is actively courting votes in the Jewish community. He will appear next week at a meet-and-greet with Jewish young professionals in the District.

"I think a mayor's responsibility is to look out for all of its residents, particularly our most vulnerable residents," said McDuffie. "At a time where the Jewish community is seeing rising antisemitism worldwide, and even the District of Columbia, it's important that they understand that their elected officials are going to use every tool possible to protect them."

McDuffie pledged to speak out against antisemitic violence and rhetoric so that the District's Jewish residents "understand that they have a mayor and elected leadership

who's going to strongly oppose those kinds of activities and threats and do everything humanly possible to protect them." He called the city's nonprofit security grant program, which provides funding to several local synagogues to pay for security expenses, a "nonnegotiable," even if the city faces other budget challenges.

Born and raised in Northeast Washington, McDuffie entered politics circuitously. He worked as a mail carrier for the USPS before ultimately going to college and law school, in a career pivot he said was inspired by witnessing the death of two friends to the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. He spent a few years as a prosecutor, in Maryland and at the Justice Department, before running for Council in 2013. McDuffie represented Ward 5, which includes the neighborhoods Bloomingdale, Eckington, Brookland and Fort Totten, until being elected to a citywide at-large position in 2022 where he served until January.

His message now is about affordability, a buzzword brought into style last year by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a DSA member like Lewis George. The way to make the city more affordable, according to McDuffie, is "economic growth with guardrails" — a contrast to the sweeping changes promised by Lewis George, the viability of which McDuffie has questioned.

"They want experience. They want vision. They want bold. They want change. What they don't want is more empty promises," said McDuffie. "What they don't want is rhetoric that isn't supported by an actual plan."

What they don't want is somebody who engages with organizations seeking to divide residents, and what we think we have as an advantage is both a vision that is about building a big tent and inviting people in and a record."

"We're the nation's capital. We can walk and chew gum," McDuffie said. "I think that's important for people to understand, that we can have innovative, transformational policies at the same time that we're delivering core services on time and within a budget that doesn't default to raising taxes on hard-working residents."

McDuffie seemed to recognize that pushing a vision of pragmatism may not be as seductive as promises powered by major spending increases. For instance, both Lewis George and McDuffie want to build new housing in the city, but Lewis George has promised to build 72,000 new units compared to 12,000 suggested by McDuffie, *The Washington Post* reported. But McDuffie argued that voters want honesty.

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plan. What they don't want is somebody who engages with organizations seeking to divide residents, and what we think we have as an advantage is both a vision that is about building a big tent and inviting people in and a record."

Though McDuffie and Lewis George are widely viewed as the frontrunners in the race, they are not the only candidates running in the Democratic primary which, in deep blue Washington, will almost certainly decide the eventual victor. Other candidates in the June 16 primary include real estate developer Gary Goodweather and former Councilmember Vincent Orange. ♦

APRIL 13, 2026

Two years on, the post-Oct. 7 Simchat Torah Challenge not only survives but thrives

Initiative launched by investor and philanthropist Daniel Loeb in 2024 has quickly taken on a life of its own, with tens of thousands of subscribers

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Two and a half years ago, news rumbled through the pews of American Jewish congregations of terrorists tearing through southern Israel on Simchat Torah in what would be the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust. Today, memories of first hearing about the Oct. 7 massacres still invoke horror, but at the same time, Jews across the world continue to turn to Simchat Torah for joy, marking the start of a new journey through the Torah, exemplified by the Simchat Torah Challenge, an initiative that emerged directly out of the tragedy of Oct. 7 and is not only continuing but thriving.

Launched by philanthropist and investor Daniel Loeb in fall 2024, the Simchat Torah Challenge organizers set the goal of inspiring 10,000 Jews to read the entire Torah in the year to come. Eighteen months later, the challenge has blown past those expectations, with 38,000 subscribers for the initiative's weekly emails, which feature Torah

insight and commentary. According to a November survey, 90% of respondents reported an improved connection to the Torah, with nearly one-third of participants saying they now talk about the week's Torah portion every week.

Realizing the potential of the challenge was "a big sort of aha" moment, Andrea Fleishaker, deputy director of the Jewish life department at UJA-Federation of New York, which partners with the challenge, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. Post-Oct. 7, "we were seeing Torah as a form of resilience and emotional support, really using Torah as a way to talk about identity and belonging, parenting and how [to] navigate family life, navigate your professional environment."

The initiative began with partnership. Before launching, Tanya Singer, program director of the Simchat Torah Challenge, reached out to the connections she trusted: Sefaria, Chabad, Yeshiva University, Moishe House (now Mem Global), Hillel International, *Tablet* magazine and other Jewish organizations.

"We sort of just got parked at *Tablet*" because it was convenient, Singer told eJP. The online magazine handled legal and finance services, but after the challenge hit 10,000 subscribers within six weeks of launching, it became clear that the initiative "just sort of took on a life" of its own.

Today, the Simchat Torah Challenge functions as an LLC under the Margaret and Daniel Loeb Foundation and continues to welcome new partners and funders, a list which now includes Repair the World, BBYO, Jewish Funders Network and others.

"We're very happy to keep developing partnerships," Singer said. "We don't see ourselves as a closed universe. It's working because we're able to connect to other resources and help our readers keep moving themselves along, Jewishly, whatever that means, from recipes to Torah learning."

The Paul E. Singer Foundation, a funder for the program, had been "tracking this post-Oct. 7 revitalization of the Jewish community," Julia Schulman, director of Jewish/Israel philanthropy at the Singer Foundation, told eJP. "We knew that there was a

longing for more on-ramps to get engaged with Jewish practices. The Simchat Torah Challenge created a playbook to make Torah accessible.”

The challenge offers study guides from teachers of all denominations. It engages readers who are scholars and it engages readers who have never touched a *chumash*. According to the November reader survey, 30% of Simchat Torah Challenge participants are 18-44. Answering a question about how they identify religiously that allowed them to select as many terms as applied, 40% of respondents identified as Conservative, a third as culturally or “just Jewish,” a quarter as Reform, 14% as Orthodox, 11% as traditional and 8% as Chabad.

Torah is “a gateway to Jewish living,” Schulman said. “We are seeing how the challenge has shaped behaviors, with more than half of participants saying they feel more comfortable in Jewish spaces. They’re embracing new expressions of Jewish identity. They’re wearing Jewish stars. They’re supporting Jewish businesses. They’re attending Jewish events. They’re giving to *tzedakah*. We just think it’s a natural thing for people to be doing. We know that when the world feels fractured, especially as it has... with the war with Iran, returning to the Torah is the most natural thing that a Jewish person can do.”

Partnerships open doors to relationships and ideas, Singer said. The partnership with the Paul E. Singer Foundation led to a three-event series in Palm Beach, Fla., featuring speakers including Rabbi David Wolpe, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl and Mijal Bitton, the spiritual leader of Manhattan’s Downtown Minyan. A partnership with Repair the World has led to guidebooks based around Torah and service targeting younger Jews. The organization holds joint Shabbat dinners with OneTable, which Singer said has “a structure in place that we can’t possibly build, nor would we try.”

Together with UJA-Federation, the challenge offered 27 microgrants in the greater New York City area for up to \$5,000 to study groups, funding food, space and staff for both in-person and virtual programming, allocating \$138,500 within the first year. This second year, the challenge is funding 34 grants for up to \$10,000 each, allocating \$246,000. The grants have funded groups of young adults, parents, students, LGBTQ youth, individuals with disabilities and people navigating trauma, addiction or isolation. While there have been plenty of sushi and Torah study groups — the most common go-to — there have also been groups based around Torah learning and environmentalism, poetry and drama.

Loeb had always been “culturally interested in my Judaism,” he said at February’s Global Alts 2026, the premier alternative investment event, held in Miami Beach, Fla. A 2017 trip to Israel alongside podcast host and author Dan Senor, “was a big eye-opener,” Loeb said. It was his first trip to the country, and in the years to come, the experience would shape his religious practice and philanthropy, leading him to shift more of his giving to Jewish and Israel-related initiatives. Since that trip, he has learned the *Shema*, one of Judaism’s core prayers, and began studying Torah. After Oct. 7, he saw an opportunity to inspire others to do the same..

The Torah is “an incredible story that on the surface is interesting, and historically it’s interesting, but as someone who wants to go really deep in things, I mean, there are literally thousands of years of scholarship on it,” Loeb said.

Orrea Light, a product developer and marketer in the beauty industry, was moved by Loeb’s story, which mirrored her own. She too had grown closer to Judaism. In her case, after losing her mother in 2010 and her father in 2020.

Inspired by their shared journey, in January, Light held a fundraiser with a por-

tion of the funds going towards the challenge, marking her Hebrew birthday. After reaching out to connections in the fashion industry, a friend at the Saint Laurent flagship store in New York City’s Meatpacking District said, “If you would like to do an event here, we would love to host it for you.” Having a non-Jewish organization volunteer made her “heart smile,” she told eJP.

The event was attended by 50 people: friends, family and peers from the fashion industry. Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff, an advisor for the challenge, and Light’s Torah “study buddy” attended. It raised \$50,000.

Torah can be “a road map for your life,” Light said, saying it even connects to her life in the fashion industry. She is already planning her next event, possibly in the Saint Laurent shop in Bal Harbour, Fla., or at a major cultural event such as Art Basel in Miami.

Singer, the Simchat Torah Challenge program director, has also learned many lessons over the past 18 months based on quarterly surveys of subscribers. For instance, the newsletter now uses Jewish art that doesn’t include people, after some participants complained about modesty issues in the images that they had been using. The challenge now offers a second weekly email featuring the teachings of Britain’s former chief rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, which sit at “this big center of a Venn diagram,” Singer said. “It seems to touch a lot of different kinds of Jews.” Emails also now include more podcast links and cultural activities such as recipes and coloring pages for kids, which subscribers have said they enjoy.

“We never envisioned owning someone’s Jewish journey at all,” Singer said. “Jews are looking for those tethers to our most essential selves. And I don’t think necessarily in a structured, religious kind of way, but we’re looking for meaning. We’re looking for clarity. And it goes back to basics.” ♦

APRIL 13, 2026

From trauma to table: An Israeli duo uses food therapy and song to foster connection

A traveling program called 'Soul and Roll' by singer Hananel Edri and Foodish CEO Merav Oren tells the Jewish story through an immersive culinary and musical experience

By Haley Cohen

Israeli singer Hananel Edri discovered his love for food and his family's Moroccan traditions in his grandmother's kitchen, where he found solace after the trauma of a rocket strike on his family home in Kiryat Shmona, near Israel's northern border with Lebanon, at age 10.

Meanwhile, Merav Oren — founder and CEO of Foodish, the culinary department of Tel Aviv's Anu Museum of the Jewish People — grew up between Atlanta and Israel, rooted in a different culinary tradition: Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine.

This year, the two brought their worlds together to form "Soul and Roll," a new immersive culinary and musical experience designed by Oren and Edri — a self-proclaimed "foodie" and singer who has performed on some of Israel's most prestigious stages including Habima National Theatre. "We talk, Hananel sings and at the end people do a hands-on experience making *ma'amoul*," a traditional Middle Eastern pastry often served at Mimouna, the Moroccan-Jewish celebration to mark the end of Passover, Oren told *Jewish Insider* on Sunday at an event to launch Foodish's international expansion.

Held at the Washington home of documentary filmmaker Aviva Kempner, some two dozen attendees got a taste of a Soul and Roll show, including Edri's rendition of "Jerusalem of Gold" and a Moroccan song dedicated to his grandmother, followed by a lesson in making date-filled *ma'amoul* pastries to bring home. The invitation-only event also featured remarks from Israeli chef and food writer Vered Guttman and Jewish cookbook author Joan Nathan.

"Anu strengthens the Jewish belonging through history and art. We at Foodish do that through food — we tell the story of the Jewish people through food, through events and festivals," said Oren.

Edri and Oren, both of whom reside in Tel Aviv, met during a visit to Warsaw, Poland, working with Jewish communities through food and music, just days before the Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks. After Hamas' massacre, the pair reunited to lead food therapy workshops.

"Just after Oct. 7 we went down to the south where evacuees were staying and started doing culinary workshops with them," Oren recalled on Sunday. One moment that still stands out to her, she said, was when she began doing dishes after the workshop and an evacuee insisted on helping because what she missed most about home was "the basic stuff like washing dishes, baking or cooking."

Also in the immediate aftermath of Oct. 7, Foodish ran a pop-up exhibition with 14 of the leading chefs in Israel, including Eyal Shani, pairing each with a famous Israeli artist. Each illustrator designed artwork for a chef coat based on the chef's personal story, which was then sold in an exhibition. Funds raised went towards expanding the food therapy workshops.

Foodish has since launched several other programs, including one that invites high school students to taste cultural, and sometimes unpopular foods like chopped liver, "that are kind of disgusting, but through that we tell the story of specific communities," said Oren.

Another program designed to alleviate loneliness among the elderly sends volunteers to their homes and to document their history as they cook together. "Then we have an event where they invite their families, go onstage and tell their stories. The food helps them tell their stories, which otherwise probably no one would have asked them about," said Oren.

The newest projects, which Oren said are "going global," include Soul and Roll, as well

as one designed for schools that focuses on teenagers and young adults to assist them in documenting their family's food stories, both online and in print.

"All of these are examples that explain to us food is not just food, it's so much more engaging. We deal with Jewish identity through food," said Oren. "We want to take what we do to Jewish communities all over the world."

Noting Israel's war with Iran and the countless hours they have spent in Tel Aviv bomb shelters over the past month, both Oren and Edri said that the launch of Foodish's latest programs comes amid a challenging period.

"This is a difficult time for us. Growing up, the rocket situation was my reality," said Edri. "Today, I live in Tel Aviv and we are facing the same reality. Doing what we do, and to be able to come here and share our stories with you, is even more important [than ever] for me because we are strong only if we stay together. Our existence really depends on each other," he told the American Jewish audience.

Although the war forced the cancellation of two of their three scheduled shows in Israel, Edri told *J* that Soul and Roll is persevering, adding, "It's difficult, but we're getting it out there." The pair's trip to the U.S. also included a Mimouna show in New York.

"My background is mainly onstage and I'm a big foodie," continued Edri, adding that what draws him to the program is the combination of "kitchen, memories, Jewish identity brought all together with music and what Anu does, and people leaving with cookies, music they can sing to and memories."

Edri, who runs his own culinary-musical web series called "Cooking with Hananel," shared the reason each Soul and Roll show

begins with the same song, “Jerusalem of Gold,” the iconic Israeli tune written by Naomi Shemer in 1967: “Merav’s family

came from Poland, my family came from Morocco,” he said. “Our grandmothers were in very different situations and settings, but

they all prayed and longed for the same place, which is Jerusalem.” ♦

APRIL 15, 2026

Zohran Mamdani’s video chief lauded Hamas chief Yahya Sinwar

The Oct. 7 mastermind died in ‘heroic’ style, according to Donald Borenstein, director of video for the Mamdani campaign and City Hall

By Will Bredderman

The architect of New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s viral video campaign paid homage to the mastermind of the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terror attacks in a series of tweets uncovered by *Jewish Insider* — posts in which the operative asserted that late Hamas military leader Yahya Sinwar “gave his entire life until the end fighting for his people’s liberation.”

Records show Donald Borenstein got paid more than \$90,000 last year by the Mamdani campaign for his services as director of video — a role in which, according to his LinkedIn, he served as “primary cinematographer” for the social media imagery that propelled the democratic socialist legislator into Gracie Mansion.

Borenstein’s Instagram indicates he has since assumed the title of “creative director” at City Hall, and he has been credited for official videos promoting the mayor and his agenda. Borenstein was also featured in a recent comedy sketch starring Mamdani and his top staffers that was shared on the official NYC Mayor’s Office YouTube channel.

Yet despite receiving attention from *The New York Times* and *New York Post* as a member of Mamdani’s inner circle, Borenstein’s profile online has largely escaped notice so far.

Archives of his X account show that in 2024, a day after Sinwar was killed by the

IDF, Borenstein described imagery of his death, captured in Israeli drone footage, as “absolutely overflowing with symbolism.”

“[I]nsanely funny that israelis are so genocidally up their own ass that they have basically hand-delivered one of the most heroic possible images they could here lmao,” Borenstein wrote from his X handle @borenstein on Oct. 17, 2024, and just a few months before Borenstein began working for Mamdani’s campaign.

Borenstein appears to have deleted this tweet, and all others referenced in this story, at some later point, though archived images remain accessible.

Federal Election Commission filings show that a few months before the posts, Borenstein wrapped up work for another politician highly critical of Israel: then-Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), who was serving out the last few months of his term after he lost his reelection to a primary challenge from Rep. George Latimer (D-NY).

The cinematographer further mocked the Israeli decision to release the video of Sinwar sitting on a couch and tossing a stick at the drone moments before he was killed.

“[S]urely this man who gave his entire life until the end fighting for his people’s liberation with no proxy will look bad when we show footage of his last stand,” Borenstein wrote sarcastically, concluding a third

post with the phrase “From the river to the sea,” often understood as calling for the annihilation of the entirety of Israel between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, and three Palestinian flag emojis.

When one reply compared the terrorist with Tom Hanks’ character in the movie “Saving Private Ryan,” the cinematographer responded with enthusiasm.

“[I]n earnest!!! you could not direct this better lol,” Borenstein replied. “[I] am honestly so deeply moved.”

In another since-deleted tweet, Borenstein wrote that “the fascist state of Israel will fall in our lifetimes.”

Neither the video producer nor the Mamdani team responded to questions about the tweets.

Borenstein is one of several figures instrumental in Mamdani’s rise whose social media accounts feature explicit support for Sinwar and the terrorist organization he led, even though the mayor has condemned terrorism personally.

In February, JI reported that the co-founder of the independent “Hot Girls for Zohran” social media and canvassing campaign had also shared multiple pro-Hamas posts. In March, JI reported that Mamdani’s wife Rama Duwaji — whom *The Cut* described as a “de facto adviser” to the mayor’s campaign — had liked posts on Instagram celebrating the Oct. 7 attacks. ♦

Former Rep. Eliot Engel, Foreign Affairs Committee chair and stalwart supporter of Israel, dies at 79

Engel was remembered by colleagues and community leaders as a ‘mensch,’ a ‘true public servant’ and ‘an American in every way’

By Marc Rod

Former Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), who represented the Bronx and Westchester County in the House from 1988 to 2020 and served for years as the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, died Friday at age 79.

Engel, who was Jewish, rose to become the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee when Democrats retook the House in 2018, after serving as the ranking member from 2013 to 2018. He was a strong and vocal advocate for the U.S.-Israel relationship and the Jewish community, also acting as a co-chair of the House antisemitism task force.

But he was defeated in the 2020 election by far-left former Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), with Engel's support for Israel becoming a primary issue in the race — an early harbinger of subsequent trends in the Democratic Party.

In an exit interview with *Jewish Insider* in 2020, Engel said that he had committed himself throughout his career to being “the best friend that Israel ever had in Congress, and I think that I have kept up that bargain,” arguing that the U.S.-Israel relationship was stronger than ever. Engel's stalwart support of Israel is now increasingly uncommon in a Democratic Party that's becoming more critical of the Jewish state.

In 2020, he called conditioning aid to Israel “just about the stupidest thing I've ever heard.”

Engel broke at times with his party on issues related to the Middle East and the Jewish community, including being one of the few House Democrats to vote in 2015 against the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran.

He also helped lead the first impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump.

Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY), who served for years alongside Engel, told *J* that Engel was “one of my greatest colleagues and dearest friends in Congress — a true progressive, a

lifelong Democrat, and a tireless champion for the people of the Bronx, Rockland, and Westchester.”

“As Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, he brought integrity and experience to America's role in the world, and he was an unwavering friend to Israel throughout his decades of service,” Nadler continued. “His legacy of service to the Bronx, Rockland, Westchester, and the nation will not be forgotten.”

“Serving alongside Eliot Engel was one of the great privileges of my time in Congress. Eliot combined deep moral clarity with an unwavering commitment to America's alliances, especially the U.S.-Israel relationship,” former Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL), who now leads the American Jewish Committee, told *J*. “He led the Foreign Affairs Committee with principle, steadiness, and a genuine respect for colleagues on both sides of the aisle. I was proud to call him not only a colleague, but a friend.”

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) said that Engel was “a champion for the people he was privileged to represent in the Bronx and Westchester County.”

“The grandson of Jews fleeing czarist Russia and a proud son of New York City, Eliot's career in public service was inspired by his deep roots,” Jeffries said. “Eliot was an astute and prolific legislator who fought for human rights, civil rights and against anti-semitism here at home and abroad.”

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said Engel was a “true public servant who delivered for the people of his beloved Bronx and Westchester for 30 years — and a dear friend going back to when I first met him as a district leader in the Bronx.”

He praised Engel's leadership of the Foreign Affairs Committee “with a rare blend of conviction, effectiveness, and kindness that has cemented him as one of the great diplomatic leaders of the 21st century.”

Rep. Brad Schneider (D-IL) said in a statement that Engel was “a mensch and a truly patriotic American.”

“He was one of the first Members of Congress to take me under his wing when I was just a candidate in 2012. After my election, it was a privilege and honor to serve on the House Foreign Affairs Committee with Eliot as Ranking Member, working with our colleagues on both sides of the aisle to promote our country's interests and advance our national security,” Schneider continued. “Throughout our service together, I got to know a real leader who never gave up on the United States and knew in his heart that Americans have so much more in common than what might set us apart.”

Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC), another longtime member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, praised Engel as a “fighter for democracy and human rights around the world,” highlighting their work together on the Caesar Civilian Protection Act sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria and their support for the Syrian people.

New York City Council Speaker Julie Menin said, “Eliot Engel proudly served New Yorkers in Congress. As a proud member of the Jewish community and the son of immigrants, he represented the best of ... America's promise.”

Rep. George Latimer (D-NY), who ousted Bowman in 2024, said that Engel, “devoted his lifetime to public service — as a teacher and as an elected official in Albany and Washington DC. His legacy consists of hard work on issues and kindness to all.”

AIPAC, in a statement, called Engel “a steadfast friend of the pro-Israel community and an unabashed champion of the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

“Throughout his distinguished 32-year career in Congress, including as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Congressman Engel worked tirelessly to

strengthen and deepen the strategic alliance between the United States and Israel,” the group said, praising him as a “leading force against efforts to delegitimize our ally Israel.”

“He led critical efforts to support security assistance to Israel, worked to impose sanctions on the Iranian regime, opposed efforts to impose political cuts or conditions on aid, rejected the BDS campaign, and courageously opposed the 2015 Iran nuclear deal,” the group continued.

Local leaders who spoke to JI remembered Engel as an ever-present and deeply caring lawmaker who was always accessible both to the Jewish community and all of the communities he represented in Congress.

New York state Rep. Jeffrey Dinowitz said that Engel had been not only a professional colleague but a close personal friend for most of his life, with their families and children growing up together.

“We were the closest of friends for decades, literally decades. So it’s a horrible loss for the family and for the other people close to him,” Dinowitz said. “He does leave behind a great legacy — just the people that they helped. There’s no question that his office and sometimes he personally, they helped tens of thousands of people ... he attended thousands of community events. He showed up everywhere.”

Dinowitz described Engel as a model of the Bronx, growing up from humble beginnings in public housing, going to college in the district and ultimately becoming the longest-serving member of Congress from the Bronx. “This is what the Bronx is all about. Somebody from modest beginnings can rise to one of the most powerful positions in the country,” Dinowitz said.

“He was the strongest supporter of Israel in the Congress, bar none,” Dinowitz added. “He was an effective advocate for Israel, and not only Israel, but Jewish causes in general. ... He stood strong and he never wavered in his support for Israel.”

State Rep. Amy Paulin said that one of her earliest memories of Engel, when her district

was redistricted into his in the 2010s, is one that stands out the most strongly. At the time, she said, the two did not know each other well, but he personally took her call on a Saturday evening to help a dying constituent obtain visas for family members to come to the United States to see him on his death bed.

“Not only did he take the call personally, he acted on it personally,” Paulin said. “What stood out for me, as I even recall the story, was just, you know, there wasn’t a hesitation on his part. ... He was just such a terrific asset for us. He went to every event that he knew about, when he was in town, and he was such a kind, warm, smart, capable person, and his loss is going to mean something. ... He cared. That’s just who he was.”

She said she later worked with Engel during the first Trump administration to obtain visas for young Palestinians to join a program with young Israelis to discuss peace-building, and he later helped facilitate a visit by Paulin to the Jewish state during a time of conflict.

“He cared deeply about Israel. He represented an area that also cares deeply about Israel,” Paulin added. “Being in Israel, you could see his love of the country. ... He wanted to be there to see everything he could, to bring those messages back to the rest of the Jewish community so that everybody had a real clear picture of what Israel was up against and he did that because of his love of Israel and his wanting Israel to exist.”

Justin Brasch, the mayor of White Plains, N.Y., told JI that Engel was “so accessible and so down to earth,” a “tremendous public servant” and “so warm” to everyone in the community.

“What probably is [most] sad about him leaving the stage is that there aren’t enough people who are just kind and nice to everyone,” Brasch said. “There’s so much anger and betrayal in politics today, and he absolutely rejected that. He was kind and helpful and accessible to everyone. And I know for

me that has always been something that has inspired me.”

He said that Engel was always willing and eager to take calls and to help constituents with any problem, in addition to being a strong supporter of Israel and fighter against antisemitism.

“He would always show up at events of concern to the Jewish community,” Brasch said. “And then we were quite proud that he was a congressman in our area.”

William Schrag, the former president of the Westchester Jewish Council, said that Engel was a “fierce [advocate]” for his constituents and “never lost sight of the people here.” Schrag said that the local Jewish community “loved him.”

Hank Sheinkopf, a longtime New York Democratic strategist who once worked for Engel, emphasized that the former congressman took on the traditional Democratic establishment in the Bronx on behalf of “the people who felt powerless” and won, remaining his own man throughout his public career.

He said Engel also clearly enjoyed being a public official — “he enjoyed the byplay, he enjoyed the drama, he enjoyed the behind the scenes stuff” and he was known for arriving early to State of the Union addresses to secure a coveted center-aisle seat and photo with the president.

Ultimately, however, Engel was “a victim of the first wave of the hostile takeover of the Democratic Party [by the far-left] which has become much more pronounced since then,” Sheinkopf continued. “Eliot Engel was an American in every way. He believed in democracy, he believed in diversity. He was racially blind. He thought power ought to be shared, and he never, never walked away from those convictions, nor his Jewishness, for which he paid the price of being evicted from office.”

“He was the precursor of what we are now experiencing. ... He was the first guy to see it way up close,” Sheinkopf continued. ♦