

THE WEEKLY PRINT

The anti-Israel dark money group behind Justice Democrats' midterm splurge • Jewish camp world rocked as major player in for-profit Jewish camping declares bankruptcy • Will Avila Chevalier's 'beyond the pale' views sink the DSA challenger's campaign against Espaillat? • Israeli startup founders receive warm reception at New York Tech Week • As AI reshapes society, Jewish leaders grapple with what comes next • 'Smartest, nicest person in the room': Colleagues mourn philanthropist Wilma 'Billie' Tisch • In Altneu art exhibit, artists grapple with the end of American Jewry's 'Golden Age'

JUNE 11, 2026

The anti-Israel dark money group behind Justice Democrats' midterm splurge

A sprawling web of cash and staff connects anti-Israel candidates and PACs nationwide

By Will Bredderman

The Justice Democrats PAC, the outside group best known for elevating the congressional Squad to power in 2018, has become the driving force behind this cycle's slate of far-left primary candidates.

And powering the Justice Democrats this year is a dark-money machine operating out of a PostalAnnex in a strip mall near Anaheim, Calif: the Institute for Middle East Understanding, a fierce critic of Israeli policy, and its new political arm, the IMEU Policy Project.

A review of financial disclosures from these three groups reveals that just as the Middle East conflict has become a defining issue for insurgent candidates on the left, it has also become increasingly crucial to Justice Democrats' outreach and finances.

With Israel at the center of this year's primary debates, Justice Democrats has lent considerable resources — cash, staff and know-how — to an array of socialist-minded candidates and smaller committees, including American Priorities super PAC. And helping bankroll it is the IMEU Policy Project, which formed just five months after the Oct. 7 attacks and quickly took in \$400,000 from its parent

organization.

That \$400,000 figure is the exact amount IMEU Policy Project has since pumped into Justice Democrats' accounts. There is no record of the Policy Project supporting any other federal PAC, just as there is no record of the decades-old Institute for Middle East Understanding providing financial assistance to another organization besides its new political spin-off.

Neither group responded to questions from *Jewish Insider*. Federal rules prohibit using money raised by organizations with the IMEU's tax designation for political purposes. The funding from the institute makes up about half of the Policy Project's budget in its most recent tax filings, meaning it has other revenues from which to pay for its electoral efforts, even as the start-up cash from its progenitor set it on its mission "to educate elected officials, policy-makers, and voters."

But the original donors behind all of the Policy Project's income remain hidden from public view.

"Either way, we don't know where it came from, so it's dark money being pushed into a PAC," said Brendan Glavin, director of

insights at pro-transparency group OpenSecrets. "People being targeted with content don't know who's trying to influence them."

Progressive politicians and advocates have long decried dark money for enabling the ultra-wealthy to influence elections while concealing their involvement from public view. But Justice Democrats has historically defended its acceptance of such funds to avoid being "outgunned," in the words of former spokesman Waleed Shahid, now a top aide to New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani.

For the first 21 years of its existence, IMEU promoted Palestinian narratives in media and the arts but avoided the electoral fray. That changed beginning with the formation of the IMEU Policy Institute in March 2024, and when it made its first gift to Justice Democrats three months later.

But California records show that despite using the same shopping center maildrop address in Tustin, Calif., as the original institute — and despite taking \$250,000 in the form of a charitable grant for "Palestine Awareness" from its parent organization, plus a \$150,000 loan — the IMEU Policy Project has never registered to operate in

the Golden State, the state attorney general's office confirmed.

That hasn't stopped the Policy Project from fundraising, or from running multiple ad campaigns in key electoral battlegrounds criticizing elected officials it deems pro-Israel: attacking Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY) in his swing district, lambasting Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear in New Hampshire and blasting Sen. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) in Iowa. It also has run ads and a petition site supporting the Block the Bombs Act to deny military aid to Israel.

It also operates PunishGenocide.org, backing a resolution proposed by Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) to declare the Jewish state guilty of genocide, and NoWarForIsrael.com, which explicitly blames Israel for President Donald Trump's decision to bomb Iran.

"This is not America First. This is Israel First," the webpage reads.

The group also runs the Peace, Accountability and Leadership Political Action Committee, PAL-PAC, which has raised tens of thousands from figures affiliated with the institute and the Policy Project and dumped into the campaigns of such candidates as New York's Darializa Avila Chevalier and Texas's Rev. Frederick D. Haynes. Leading the PAC is Amira Hassan, former political director and current board member for Justice Democrats. Its webpage prominently features an endorsement from Tlaib, who calls it "only PAC exclusively committed to justice and accountability for the Palestinian people."

But the Policy Project's largest recorded intervention in the political process is the \$400,000 it has injected directly into Justice Democrats' coffers. It is the single biggest donor to Justice Democrats this cycle, outstripping even the left-wing PAC's principle patron of past years, the Tlaib campaign. The Policy Project also works closely with the congresswoman, platforming her on its social media channels, boosting her bills and lending quotes to her press releases.

Tlaib did not answer questions from JI regarding her relationship with Justice Democrats and the IMEU Policy Project,

and whether she had any role beyond providing money for one and publicly supporting the other. The Michigan congresswoman was part of Justice Democrats' freshman class of elected officials in 2018.

In March, a writer for the left-wing media outlet *Zeteo* posted that the IMEU Policy Project and Justice Democrats had spent \$100,000 on an ad campaign attacking congressional candidate and former Rep. Melissa Bean (D-IL) and pushing her ultimately unsuccessful anti-Israel opponent Junaid Ahmed. In late May, Justice Democrats uploaded an ad to Instagram boosting Philadelphia congressional contender Chris Rabb, who went on to win the nomination, a spot the PAC reported having "put \$260,000 behind" as part of a "partnership" with IMEU Policy Institute.

The Policy Institute affirmed this figure in a joint statement with Justice Dems when Rabb triumphed on primary night last week. The two also boasted of spending \$200,000 on mail ads promoting the campaign of Adam Hamawy, who carried a plurality of the vote in a crowded Democratic contest to replace Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ).

The Justice Democrats and IMEU Policy Project did not respond to questions about the cost breakdown for these ad efforts, or whether the Policy Project solicited contributions for Justice Democrats to help pay for them.

Justice Democrats has also coordinated closely with American Priorities super PAC, the professed anti-AIPAC committee, which at its launch described itself as part of a "partner network" that included the IMEU Policy Project and Justice Democrats. That same press release also identified American Priorities' independent expenditure director as Hannah Fertig, who previously held the identical title at Justice Democrats.

Justice Democrats' support for the younger organization has come mainly in the form of in-kind donations of digital production services. However, reports of the value and purpose of those services that the two PACs have made to the Federal Election Commission differ radically.

According to Justice Democrats' most

recent FEC reports, it has provided \$23,500 worth of production costs to American Priorities, mostly for ads attacking Bean and supporting Ahmed in March.

But in American Priorities' submissions to the commission, this support is nowhere to be found. Rather, American Priorities recorded \$50,000 in donated production costs from Justice Democrats in February, in support of Nida Allam's failed challenge to Rep. Valerie Foushee (D-NC). It did not report any help from Justice Democrats in the Illinois race.

Neither American Priorities nor Justice Democrats responded to questions from JI about these discrepancies. Glavin, of OpenSecrets, noted that the FEC has repeatedly flagged problems in Justice Democrats' disclosures, including over in-kind contributions, compelling it to file multiple amended filings in recent months.

"I'm not sure what's going on with their reporting," the campaign finance expert said. "We expect to see some things that aren't here."

The bulk of American Priorities' funding has come from three individuals: tech investors Omer Hasan and Tariq Afaq Ahmed, who gave \$1 million and \$500,000 respectively; and e-commerce executive Mohammad Waqas Javed, who chipped in an additional million. Waqas Javed is also one of Justice Democrats' largest donors after the IMEU Policy Project and the Tlaib campaign, having contributed \$50,000 to the PAC.

This same trio provided much of the money for the New Yorkers for Lower Costs super PAC that helped propel Mamdani into City Hall.

Mamdani attended the institute's gala in April.

Mamdani's office — including Shahid, the former Justice Democrats spokesman — did not respond to questions about their awareness of the IMEU Policy Project and its relationship with Justice Democrats.

The Policy Project shares the original institute's longtime executive director, Margaret DeReus. Early in the institute's existence, DeReus penned an editorial for the *Houston Chronicle* calling for immediate recognition of and engagement with the then-newly elected Hamas

leadership on the Palestinian Legislative Council.

“When Palestinians in the occupied territories gave Hamas a resounding victory, they sent the world a message. The status quo of Israeli colonization and denial of Palestinian rights is unsustainable,” she wrote under her maiden name Zaknoen. “Hamas earned people’s trust by providing

social services, hospitals and schools, and running municipal governments free of corruption. Ironically, Hamas may provide the Palestinians with the good governance and true political reform Fatah denied them.”

The two IMEU groups also share a policy director: George Washington University adjunct Josh Ruebner. A co-founder of Jews

for Peace in Palestine and Israel, which eventually merged into Jewish Voice for Peace, Ruebner blasted then-GWU President John DeGioia just days after Oct. 7 for his “one-sided condemnation of Hamas.” ♦

JUNE 10, 2026

Jewish camp world rocked as major player in for-profit Jewish camping declares bankruptcy

As the holding company that controls dozens of overnight and day camps goes under, the camps themselves stress that the summer is going ahead as planned

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

A major player in Jewish American camping declared bankruptcy last week, a move that could affect thousands of Jewish campers just as the summer season is getting underway.

New York-based real estate owners Michael and David Shabsels declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in New Jersey last Thursday, both personally and under their umbrella group, Simad Holdings. Since declaring bankruptcy, the brothers and their firm have refused to speak to the press.

The brothers, who entered the for-profit camp business in 2006, own 22 overnight camps and eight day camps across the Northeast, predominantly in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maine.

Many of their camps have Jewish programming or are primarily attended by Jews. The average cost to attend one of the Shabsels brothers’ camps is \$8,000-\$10,000 per season, with some topping \$17,000.

Under Chapter 11 bankruptcy, businesses can remain open, and the collection of debt is paused, but the bankrupt company must develop a reorganization plan that includes how it will restructure debt and pay creditors. The brothers have until Oct. 2 to do so.

While representatives of the for-profit

camps involved have assured *eJewishPhilanthropy* that they will run this summer, camp insiders say their long-term futures could be vulnerable if the brothers are forced to sell off the camp properties.

“I really don’t know anything,” a representative from Camp Achim, a Jewish camp in Catskill, N.Y., told eJP yesterday. “I just know camp is moving forward as planned.”

Jewish camps that could be affected by the bankruptcy include Blue Star Camps in Western North Carolina, Camp Lavi in Pennsylvania and the SHMA Camps in New York.

Unlike the majority of Jewish camps in America, the Simad Holdings camps are not directly affiliated with any Jewish denomination or the Jewish Community Center movement. As for-profit enterprises, they also don’t fall under the Foundation for Jewish Camp’s umbrella, which includes over 345 nonprofit Jewish camps across North America, but this could change if the Shabsels’ camps become nonprofits, an option that could be attractive if the land that the camps sit on is put up for sale as part of the debt restructuring.

Jamie Simon, CEO of Foundation of Jewish Camp, told eJP that she was not able to speak about the Shabsels-owned camps or their future due to their privately owned status.

“There is a lot we don’t know about the camps affected, but what we do hope for is a positive resolution so campers and families aren’t impacted, since we know camp is so influential,” she said. “Our hearts are with everyone affected — and what we’re focused on this summer is making sure campers can experience the joy, friendship, belonging and Jewish community that camp provides.”

Demand for camp is higher than ever, with last year’s EJC census showing that nearly 200,000 young people attended Jewish camp at an EJC-affiliated camp last summer, a record.

Court documents show that the Shabsels brothers listed over \$500 million in liabilities. Last December, their camp properties were appraised to be worth \$466 million with a projected annual return of 10.5% for 2025.

That same month, the brothers, through Simad Holdings, which is based in the British Virgin Islands, completed a \$195 million bond offering in Israel, with the bonds backed by 13 camp properties. But late last month, Simad informed the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange that it had defaulted on a payment to bondholders. Also, the company reviewed its first-quarter financial statements and found that \$34 million was missing. The funds had been transferred to the brothers’ other companies.

Originally, Simad claimed the transfer was an error, but after the company's audit committee asked the brothers to return the funds — plus the 7% interest rate of the bonds — the brothers said they were unable to do so. Quickly, after news of the missing funds broke last week, several Simad board members resigned, later deciding to stay on temporarily to attempt to recover the money.

Bondholders had first lien on the camps, but according to the Israeli financial newspaper *Globes*, which broke the news of the bankruptcy, many insiders accused the brothers of double pledging assets, with one insider telling the newspaper: "It seems that this is a case of a company owner who came here to raise debt by lying."

The brothers, who are now facing a criminal probe, have found themselves facing multiple lawsuits over the past decade, including a 2025 case alleging breach of contract and two lawsuits — one by the co-owners of Kiwi Country Day Camp in Carmel, N.Y., and another by a co-owner of Camp Lavco in Lakewood, Pa. —

that accuse the brothers of refinancing co-owned property and taking proceeds only for themselves, then refusing to share financial documents with their co-owners.

According to *Globes*, many involved in the situation in Israel blame the underwriter who brought Simad to the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange, the Israel Securities Authority and the ratings agency Midroog, which assessed the bonds with an investment-grade rating.

After news of the missing funds broke, the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange suspended trading of the company's bonds as the price fell to junk level. In addition, Israeli securities investigators launched an investigation into Simad over possible securities legal violations.

Despite the developments with the holding company, the camps themselves stress that all is well going into this summer.

"Everything is good," a Blue Star Camps employee assured eJP, saying the camp is running as normal this summer and is "absolutely financially healthy."

In addition to their camp holdings, the brothers own office buildings and retail properties. They are connected to numerous Jewish nonprofits, with David Shabsels listed on Orthodox Union's Benefactor Circle, and Michael Shabsels and his wife listed as members of United Hatzalah's U.S. National Board. In July 2023, Michael Shabsels and his wife hosted an event for United Hatzalah, and in July 2024, the brothers hosted an event for Nevut Lone Soldier Veteran, an organization that supports IDF lone soldiers.

"I think to be successful in any business, anyone who is a business owner must always have the mindset that they are never going to fail and that they're never going to give up, no matter how bad business gets," Michael Shabsels said in a 2020 YouTube presentation for Olami Professional Circles, which connects young Jews with "the best business minds in the industry." "The only thing worse than the business being bad is if you throw in the towel." ♦

JUNE 9, 2026

Will Avila Chevalier's 'beyond the pale' views sink the DSA challenger's campaign against Espaillat?

Avila Chevalier has a long record of extreme views, including calling for the abolition of police, voicing pro-Russia sentiment and rejecting Israel's existence

By Matthew Kassel

As Darializa Avila Chevalier mounts an insurgent campaign against Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D-NY) in Upper Manhattan, the democratic socialist has faced mounting scrutiny over past controversial posts that have surfaced in recent days, raising questions about whether the negative publicity will blunt her chances in the June 23 primary election.

While she has struggled to defend her posts when pressed by reporters, some strategists suggested that her incendiary views could get overlooked amid a national political landscape favoring extreme, anti-establishment sentiments now fueling the rise of several far-left candidates in

Democratic primaries around the country.

"It seems to not matter in a way that it would have been a deal-breaker 15 or 20 years ago," Chris Coffey, a Democratic strategist in New York City who is not involved in the primary, told *Jewish Insider* on Monday. "This race feels like our new outlier, where some of the things she's said are so far beyond the pale."

Avila Chevalier, endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, has drawn backlash for a series of now-deleted social media posts in which she called for abolishing the police, voiced anti-American and pro-Russian sentiments, shared a post

saying "Israel doesn't exist," and harshly criticized former President Joe Biden as well as former Vice President Kamala Harris, among other inflammatory comments that recently surfaced.

The 32-year-old Afro-Latina community organizer has been at pains to explain her remarks, which she has largely refused to disavow, alternately accusing Espaillat of "relitigating" old social media posts, saying that her "understanding of how to approach the systems has grown" and claiming that she is "not sure about the context" of some comments — including one arguing the United States had "bullied" Russia into attacking Ukraine.

Avila Chevalier, who helped lead anti-Israel protests at Columbia University, also showed no regret about her decision to join a widely condemned pro-Hamas rally in Times Square just a day after the terror group's Oct. 7, 2023, attacks on Israel.

Despite the range of offensive posts, some strategists speculated that Avila Chevalier's statements specifically calling Biden a "rapist" and "war criminal" and dismissing Harris with an expletive could dent her ascendant campaign in vote-rich Harlem — where older Black constituents would be most likely to find such views off-putting.

"The Biden-Harris tweets could be very damaging to her in Harlem, where the race will be won and lost," Hank Sheinkopf, a Democratic strategist who is not affiliated with the race, told JI.

Still, he added, "There are a lot of people who will say she's right."

The primary challenge appears to have crept up on Espaillat, who has found himself playing defense in the closing stretch of the campaign, amid a surge of outside spending hoping to boost his reelection bid.

While some pro-Espaillat messaging has sought to highlight Avila Chevalier's past posts, one strategist familiar with the congressman's campaign, who was granted anonymity to speak candidly, said the congressman's team broke an unwritten rule of political messaging when it went negative in a recent attack ad that ripped her remarks about Biden and Harris.

Typically, outside groups are tasked with such messaging, unless a campaign "really, really has to," the strategist, who interpreted the Espaillat ad as a sign of weakness, said of the decision.

"It was an emotional, really irrational move from the campaign to put it out," the political strategist told JI. "They're being reactive and not proactive."

The Latino Victory Fund and BOLD PAC, the political arm of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus chaired by Espaillat, have spent heavily in the race to bolster the endangered incumbent.

A Democratic operative familiar with the primary also indicated to JI that Espaillat could count on a separate seven-figure independent expenditure to boost his bid, but with early voting set to begin this weekend, the status of that spending was unclear as of Monday afternoon.

Justice Democrats, a far-left group that works to unseat incumbents, and American Priorities, a new anti-Israel super PAC created to counter AIPAC, have likewise invested aggressively on behalf of Avila Chevalier — even as she has condemned outside spending on her campaign site.

While she has accused Espaillat of being beholden to pro-Israel donors linked to AIPAC, the group's super PAC is not expected to engage in the primary with just two weeks remaining.

Some strategists privately expressed surprise that Mamdani, who had reportedly

promised to endorse Espaillat, backed his opponent, while raising doubts about whether the mayor and his team had properly vetted her online history.

Unlike Mamdani, who distanced himself during his mayoral bid from past social media comments calling to defund the police, Avila Chevalier has, for her part, strained to formulate a compelling argument for why she has evolved, her critics have noted.

Mamdani's decision to wade into the closely watched race for Espaillat's seat represents a major risk to his political credibility, as he also backs a challenger to a pro-Israel House incumbent while throwing support behind a DSA-aligned candidate running against the favored successor to an outgoing congresswoman in a pair of bitterly fought primary matchups.

But while those candidates — Brad Lander and Claire Valdez, respectively — are seen as likely to win, the results of Avila Chevalier's race are more uncertain, observers note.

In light of her numerous problematic posts, Coffey, the strategist, said the outcome ultimately will show whether voters view such sentiments as disqualifying — especially among younger constituents most likely to back her campaign.

"We're going to find out whether people care or not," he told JI. ♦

JUNE 8, 2026

Israeli startup founders receive warm reception at New York Tech Week

Airwallex and Andreessen Horowitz brought 12 Israeli founders to New York to build relationships, pitch investors and learn from their American counterparts

By Haley Cohen

There's a mantra in the Israeli startup world that its founders are months behind their American counterparts. New York Tech Week gave them a chance to close that gap, according to investors who descended on Manhattan last week.

Michael Morgenstern, head of startups at

financial technology platform Airwallex, which teamed up with Andreessen Horowitz — one of the world's leading venture capital firms — to bring a delegation of Israeli founders to tech week for the first time, told *Jewish Insider* that VCs are looking to see more AI products come out of Israel, which historically has

been security focused.

"It would be interesting to see an AI lab out of Israel," he said. "Why haven't we seen an OpenAI or Claude, something of that status, coming out of the Israeli ecosystem? It makes me wonder if we are stagnating as an ecosystem. So exposing the Israeli market to what's going on on the ground

gives Israeli entrepreneurs the chance to get months ahead.”

“The mantra in the Israeli startup market right now is that Israeli founders and entrepreneurs are nine months behind the Americans,” he continued. “So if we can fly them here, make sure that people with low budgets — that will soon have high budgets — come to the U.S. and get on the ground, they’re going to get back to Israel with a whole new set of insights that are going to prepare them and be on par with the American companies versus the ones in Tel Aviv.”

“So it’s a very strategic play for them to come, get the experience and do the pitches. Ultimately, the U.S. is the ultimate market for most Israeli founders so if we can be the corridor at Airwallex and I can be the shepherd, it’s a delight to do so,” he said.

The 12 Israeli founders included in the delegation said they felt widely embraced at last week’s New York Tech Week, overwhelmingly saying that they felt no need to hide their roots.

“I feel I can be openly Israeli in the U.S. — specifically at tech week,” Aviv Shamny, founder of Limy AI, an Israeli startup that helps brands and products show up on AI search engines, told JI. “I didn’t feel any antisemitism at all at tech week.”

Shamny, who recently moved to the U.S. from Israel to grow his company — and served in combat following the Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks — said the idea for his startup “came to me in the trenches of war.” For the past year, Limy has been part of A16Z Speedrun, an elite, highly competitive 12-week startup accelerator program operated by Andreessen Horowitz.

“People are really hustling,” said Morgenstern. “Last week was Boston tech week, next week is London. New York is the primo one. People are enjoying it. It’s decentralized as there’s what feels like thousands of events all over the city for every stage and profile.”

Morgenstern led several events throughout the week, including taking founders who recently moved to New York in a helicopter to give them their first tour of Manhattan. “We did a pitch in the air called ‘Up in the Air with Airwallex,’” he said, adding that amid historic rates of

antisemitism, “I’ve only heard positive things from Israelis meeting with non-Israelis.”

The Israeli delegation consisted of entrepreneurs launching new startups — many of whom declined to speak with JI due to their companies’ stealth status.

“It was a very selective process,” said Morgenstern. “There were hundreds, if not thousands, of applications. Andreessen Horowitz picked the founders, and we’re strategic partners with them. We’re the ones supporting the founders with their banking and corporate operations. This is the first time we’ve done this and we plan on doing it again.”

Much of the A16Z delegation is composed of deeper infrastructure companies, working on AI tools, cybercompanies, fintech and defenstetech.

“Historically, cyber is what Israelis have been known for, but it’s interesting to see the early-stages people try to zig when everyone’s zagging and look a little different to stand out,” said Morgenstern. “So an Israeli founder doing a consumer company, selling to individuals is very unique. Healthcare and fintech also. We’re also seeing some big rounds happening. A lot of Israeli teams are raising \$10, \$20, \$30 million-plus out of stealth mode. It’s interesting they don’t want anyone to know what they’re doing, but at the same time they’re raising a lot of money and growing their balance sheet. From my seat in the VC land, I see an incredible demand and the resilience of Israelis right now is showing why they’re such an investable asset.”

“Generally, Andreessen Horowitz has a unique stance,” said Shamny, who was not part of the A16Z delegation since the firm has already invested in his company.

“On one hand, they don’t take sides, they take the side of innovation. They see Israel as one of the main innovation hubs and are really doubling down on it. We’ve been getting positive feedback from the firm. I do think this contributes to us being able to position ourselves as still the startup nation, regardless of all the antisemitism going on in the world. I think the war — regardless of what is wrong and what is right — has been impactful on Israel’s presence and what people think about us as

Israelis. Andreessen’s push toward Israeli innovation has been helpful in positioning ourselves.”

“As Israelis we are very proud to take part in this unique group of people and companies. It’s fun to be a part of.”

Yair Vardi, an Israeli American venture capitalist and founding partner of Fusion, Israel’s leading pre-seed fund, produced several events during tech week.

“I didn’t see reluctance to work with Israelis this week,” Vardi told JI. “On the contrary, New York is the home to over 400 Israeli startups. In the last few years, New York has become even more attractive for Israeli startups. I don’t see that changing even with politics. New York is home for the stock exchange and many Fortune 500 companies and a big Jewish community. [Israelis] aren’t happy with the new mayor [Zohran Mamdani], but I don’t think it pushes them not to come. This week we saw the numerous delegations coming out of Israel [including the one from] A16Z. I’ve attended a dozen events with Israeli entrepreneurs, from cybersecurity to legal and finance,” said Vardi.

A jam-packed week of networking ended with a Friday night Shabbat dinner organized by Brex and Tech Tribe, a New York-based community for Jews in tech and digital media, part of the Chabad Young Professionals network, founded by Rabbi Mordechai Lightstone.

“We try to create a Jewish community for people who work in startups and try to give them the tools and skills they need for what they create,” Lightstone told JI. “We constantly have conversations around the intersection of technology and Judaism; can you ask *halachic* questions to ChatGPT instead of a rabbi, those types of things.”

“New York Tech Week is something that has grown over the past couple years in general,” he said. “The city is booming with excitement and energy, much more than previous years.”

“Jews in tech have woken up and realized they have to really represent it, to go out there and say I’m Jewish, I have Jewish values and I’m proud of it. In the past three years we’ve seen a lot of that, and this week has been an expression of that,” said Lightstone, who hosted the first Tech

Week Shabbat dinner just weeks after the Oct. 7 attacks. “At the time, it was a very cathartic experience for everybody to be together and feel comfortable when people were very on edge and felt they couldn’t speak in the workplace,” he said.

“There have been incidents of antisemitism in tech since Oct. 7, especially in the big companies. They didn’t always handle antisemitism well. They’re very careful with [diversity, equity and inclusion], but when it came to Jews [they] were lacking,” continued Lightstone.

About 100 VCs and founders attended

the Shabbat in downtown Manhattan, which Lightstone called an opportunity for an “un-networking experience to connect and unwind from the week.” Guests were served arak and whiskey made by the Israeli startup Verstill, which utilizes AI technology in its spirits creation and maturation process, and Israel’s Jezreel Winery sponsored the wine. American Friends of Reichman University co-sponsored the meal.

Ahead of the dinner, Noga Sapir, the founder of a mental health startup called Reflect, who came from Israel for her first

New York Tech Week, told JI the week was “great.”

“I’m fundraising right now so I’ve been looking at the events where founders and fundraisers meet,” she said. “I did have concerns [coming as an Israeli] but I was completely embraced. There has not been one person that when I told I’m Israeli didn’t say that’s amazing and awesome. I think because Israel is such a powerhouse for tech companies, people in the startup environment have come to expect an Israeli presence.” ♦

JUNE 5, 2026

As AI reshapes society, Jewish leaders grapple with what comes next

Rabbi Mordechai Lightstone: ‘When we ascribe human attributes — emotions, consciousness and soul — to AI, we risk transforming a sophisticated instrument into an idol’

By Gabby Deutch

When Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, an Orthodox rabbi from Brooklyn, stepped up to the microphone in April to share his perspective on what Judaism has to say about artificial intelligence, his remarks resembled a sermon he might deliver on the *bimah*.

Except the audience for this talk was not congregants. It was interfaith religious leaders, and — more importantly — representatives of the Silicon Valley giants Anthropic and OpenAI.

Potasnik quoted the Book of Deuteronomy, when Moses delivers his final address to the Israelites before they cross into the Promised Land. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live,” Moses says, channeling the words of God.

“Of course you’re going to choose life,” Potasnik said at the AI convening, comments he relayed to *Jewish Insider* this week. “But sometimes when you choose it, it also comes with certain dangers. If you look at the story of the Garden of Eden, for example, you are forbidden to eat of the tree

of knowledge. Why? You can understand when you look at AI, because knowledge without guardrails, knowledge without a moral component, can be a very dangerous thing.”

Potasnik, who is the executive vice president of the New York Board of Rabbis, delivered this word of caution at the inaugural gathering of a new initiative called the Faith-AI Covenant, which argues that religious communities have something valuable to teach the companies developing the large language models that are reshaping the way many humans engage with knowledge and with the world around them.

A group of rabbis, educators and thinkers in the Jewish world is deeply engaged in considering related questions.

Some of them are theological, almost *halachic*: Should rabbis be allowed to use AI to write sermons? Can an AI chatbot be considered a *havruta*, or study partner, in place of an actual human? Should AI even be used for serious Jewish study?

DZ Kalman, a research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute who studies Judaism and technology, argued strongly

against AI being used to write sermons. “I think people in religious communities would like to know that there’s at least one space in their lives when they are able to be free of machines, when they can actually just be humans interacting with other humans,” he said.

The Orthodox Union faced criticism from within its ranks after releasing a new app in March that uses AI to help people study Torah. Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank, an instructor of Talmud, halacha and philosophy at Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school, delivered a talk at YU where he criticized the app and said AI should not be used to resolve rabbinic debates.

“It’s true the OU says you shouldn’t rely on such an app for practical halacha, though one wonders what purpose there is in putting it out,” Wiederblank said.

Other questions are more philosophical in nature. How can Jewish wisdom guide people who are looking for meaning at a moment of massive technological and even societal upheaval, with the possibility of looming job loss? What is the value of God when AI comes across as all-knowing?

“We spent a few thousand years thinking really hard about what it means to be human and how to be human and how to live a purposeful life,” said Joshua Foer, the founder of Sefaria, an online library of Jewish texts. “At a moment when we’re going to be really challenged about how to be human, I think Judaism’s got a lot of compelling answers, and maybe this is the moment that we really need to stand up and be a light.”

And then there is the matter of whether LLMs should be shaped, in some way, by religion. They already are being built with certain parameters for morality.

Anthropic was created by several former OpenAI employees who were concerned about AI safety, and the company has built its brand on the idea that AI should be constructed responsibly. Anthropic employs Amanda Askill, a philosopher, to teach morality to Claude, Anthropic’s popular chatbot. In January, Anthropic published its 30,000-word “constitution” for Claude, which details how the company trained Claude and the values it hopes to imbue in the chatbot. “We want Claude to have good values,” the document states.

“A lot of people, I imagine, are very happy just to be told that they’re absolutely right, so I think that this could be an instance where potentially some Talmudic AI that’s more designed to offer a counter argument or multiple perspectives off the bat might be an interesting way to counter this default solipsism,” said Zohar Atkins, a rabbi and philosopher.

OpenAI also professes to value safety, and OpenAI founder Sam Altman told a Senate hearing in 2023 that people are “rightly anxious” about the technology. The company released a document in December described as its “model spec,” which discusses “our approach to shaping desired model behavior.” ChatGPT is taught to “love humanity,” and “humanity should be in control of how AI is used and how AI behaviors are shaped,” according to the model spec.

“All of [the chatbots] are interested in the question of how do you align the AI to not do bad things and to do good things, and

then there’s obviously a lot of complexity under the hood of defining what the good is and what do you do when there’s ethical dilemmas,” Zohar Atkins, a rabbi and philosopher, told JI.

Atkins is building an AI chatbot called Yochai to help people engage with Jewish texts. Could there be a “Torah values AI,” he asked, where Jewish virtues like debate and humility are baked into the way a chatbot engages with users? He drew a contrast between that idea to the way most chatbots adopt a sycophantic approach, telling the user what they want to hear.

This spring, Anthropic convened two major summits for faith leaders. The first, in March, was a two-day gathering for Christian leaders. Several weeks later, Anthropic hosted another two-day event featuring guests from several religious minorities: Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Latter-day Saint, Sikh, Unitarian Universalist, African indigenous, Islamic and Taoist, according to *Politico*.

“As AI becomes more consequential for society, questions about the values and moral considerations that shape these systems are important ones, and we think they benefit from a wide range of perspectives,” an Anthropic spokesperson told *Politico*. (JI did not receive a response to a request for comment to Anthropic. OpenAI declined to comment for this article.)

“Increasingly powerful general purpose AI is not inevitable. It’s a choice, and moral choice as much as anything else. Just because you can build something, doesn’t mean you should build it,” said Alex Pascal, the executive director of Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society and a former advisor to President Joe Biden on AI policy. “What I hope the faith leaders are communicating is that the potential impact of AI and the impact already of AI is gargantuan, and it’s really affecting almost everybody, and that the power to design and deploy the technology should not be in the hands of a very, very select few people.”

Kalman, who attended the April meeting, declined to share much, noting

that it was conducted under the promise of privacy. But he described Anthropic as a new company that “has found itself with huge amounts of power and is trying to understand how to wield that power responsibly.” He entered the meeting with a good deal of skepticism, he wrote in a blog post afterward, but he left feeling hopeful.

Even if AI companies are engaging with the diverse users of their products in good faith, any guardrails placed on their LLMs come entirely at the discretion of the companies creating those products. That leads to potentially conflicting motivations — grow their product and build their bottom line, or err on the side of responsibility and safety?

“Right now, there’s gargantuan power asymmetry. It’s really a few people, at the end of the day, who are designing and deploying AI to all of us,” said Alex Pascal, the executive director of Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society and a former advisor to President Joe Biden on AI policy.

Anthropic, for instance, recently said it would not release a new AI model called Mythos because it is too powerful, and runs the risk of severely undermining global security. But any decisions like this rest on the goodwill of the people running these companies, each of whom have their own biases and blind spots.

“The people creating this are going to introduce a certain level of their own worldview into what they’re creating,” said Rabbi Mordechai Lightstone, the director of Tech Tribe, a New York-based affiliate of Chabad Young Professionals that serves as a gathering place for Jews working in the tech sector.

Lightstone considers himself an advocate for the technology, but he has warned of the risks of putting too much faith in AI.

“When we ascribe human attributes — emotions, consciousness and ‘soul’ — to AI, we risk transforming a sophisticated instrument into an idol,” Lightstone wrote in a recent blog post. “Key to our harnessing AI is understanding it for what it is: A tool — an immensely powerful one — but not a being with a soul.”

One Jewish response to the almost-

messianic belief that AI will usher in a utopia comes from Sefaria's chief learning officer, Sara Wolkenfeld and Sam Arbesman, a scientist-in-residence at the venture capital firm Lux Capital. The pair wrote in *Arc Magazine* last month that a Jewish approach to AI might be rooted in the incremental approach of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world step by step.

They compared it to the Talmudic story of Rabbi Akiva, who “is said to have been inspired to reach for greatness after observing the power of water to wear away stone, drop by drop, as he drew water from the local well,” the Wolkenfeld and Arbesman wrote. “Therein lies the potential of artificial intelligence from a Jewish perspective — not as a far-off goal or panacea, but as a set of tools that provide each of us the means to chip away at barriers and obstacles and create an improved society.”

Last month, Pope Leo XIV released a 42,000-word document known as an encyclical that called for the safeguarding of human dignity as AI develops further and becomes even more integrated into people's lives. Some rabbis have explored similar questions, but nothing has come close to exerting as much power or reach as the pope's document. Some of that is by design; Judaism has no central leader of any kind. But some of it may be because many religious leaders have not fully comprehended the scope of the developing technology's potential.

“A problem I'd say in the Jewish world right now is it's not clear whose job it is to think about this,” Wolkenfeld told JI.

“I think the Jewish community needs to be actively grappling with a whole range of questions. What does it mean to be human? What are we outsourcing to technology versus retaining for ourselves? We're going to be seeing massive job dislocation, and so what does that mean, first of all, socioeconomically in our communities?” Zvika Krieger, the rabbi of Chochmat HaLev, said. “Also, for so much of human history, people's worth and their days were tied to their profession, and we're seeing a fundamental change of how to build a meaningful life.”

Zvika Krieger is the rabbi of Chochmat HaLev, a progressive minyan in Berkeley, Calif. He does not have the typical resume for a rabbi: He was Facebook's director of responsible innovation, and a State Department “ambassador” to Silicon Valley in the Obama administration. He now consults for Silicon Valley tech companies, including both Anthropic and OpenAI.

“Most of the leaders in the Jewish community don't know much about AI, so it can feel like the blind leading the blind. I'm often the only person in the room for these conversations who's actually worked in a tech company, and the knowledge gap limits how productive these conversations can be,” Krieger told JI.

He described AI as an “epochal technology that is going to fundamentally change the nature of humanity in a way that I think we haven't seen since the printing press.”

In some ways, conversations about AI are everywhere within the Jewish community — at congregations, at Shabbat

dinner tables, at campus Hillels — because of how rapidly the technology has become a part of everyday life. But discussing how to best use specific tools is different than the biggest questions about life and society that AI prompts.

The Jewish conversation about AI needs to be “top-down and also bottom-up,” said Wolkenfeld. “I think every rabbi needs to be thinking about this.”

Potasnik, the New York rabbi who addressed the interfaith tech convening in April, agrees that AI is a transformative technology. But Potasnik, who is 79, remembers how other technological innovations have upended his rabbinate, too, a perspective he brings into his observations on AI.

“We used to think that the newspaper, the radio, those were the popular places for dissemination of information. Well, how many people listen to the radio for information [now]?” Potasnik said. “When I first became a rabbi, I said, ‘If you don't know baseball, you can't be a successful rabbi.’ Today, if you don't know technology, you're not going to be successful either. You're going to be seen as ancient, not advanced.”

But Potasnik believes there is one thing that AI cannot replace that is at the heart of what it means to be Jewish.

“We have what's called the theology of presence. You have to be present, you have to show up, that's what people want,” Potasnik said. “I think AI cannot take that from us. We still need the human to hug, to hold. We need to see each other, listen and learn from each other. These are important, indispensable ingredients in our human relationships.” ♦

‘Smartest, nicest person in the room’: Colleagues mourn philanthropist Wilma ‘Billie’ Tisch

Tisch, the matriarch of a prominent philanthropic family, helped lead a merger between UJA and the New York federation in the 1980s and held lay positions throughout the Jewish, medical and academic worlds

By Nira Dayanim

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

When Louise Greilsheimer thinks about Wilma “Billie” Tisch, she thinks about the way a room felt after she left it.

“When you walked in a room, she didn’t strike you,” Greilsheimer told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, “but when you left, you knew that she was probably the smartest and nicest person in the room.”

Tisch — a billionaire philanthropist, matriarch of one of New York’s most prominent Jewish families and the first woman ever elected president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York — died on Sunday at 98.

Greilsheimer recalled encountering Tisch in the early 1970s, when Greilsheimer was a newcomer to New York City. After joining a young leadership division at the New York federation, Tisch personally invited her onto the federation’s board, a gesture characteristic of the woman Greilsheimer would come to know over the following decades: someone who not only broke barriers herself, but made a point of bringing others through the door behind her, she said.

“Many women in business and other places in the early years have been accused of not looking behind them and pulling women along,” said Greilsheimer. “Billie was very unique in the way she looked, not just to men, but to younger people and women, and mentored them, and brought them along.”

Born Wilma Stein on June 25, 1927, in Long Branch, N.J., grew up in nearby Asbury Park, the daughter of Joseph Stein, a journalist who founded New Jersey’s first Cadillac dealership, and Rose Liebesman Stein. Tisch graduated from Skidmore

College in 1948 with a degree in economics and a minor in accounting. After a brief stint as a secretary at Time, Inc., she married Laurence Tisch in October of that year.

Tisch was the final surviving member of her family’s original quartet of philanthropists, whose combined legacy is reflected in a wide range of educational, cultural and medical institutions carrying the Tisch name, and in decades of sustained support for Jewish organizations throughout New York City.

Her foray into organized philanthropy came through Blythedale Children’s Hospital, where she joined the board in 1962. Her work there brought her into contact with the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, which she joined in 1969 as a member of its distribution committee. By 1975, she was the committee’s chair. Greilsheimer, who served on the committee under Tisch, remembered what it meant to sit in one of those meetings. “When you were on a committee that Billie chaired, you did your homework,” she said.

Her years at the federation’s helm also coincided with a consequential period in modern Jewish philanthropy. Prior to 1973, the organization — now known as the UJA-Federation of New York — was two separate organizations: The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, and the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York. The federation, founded in 1917, supported the local Jewish community, while the UJA, founded in 1941, supported Jews overseas, primarily in Israel.

When the Yom Kippur War broke out in 1973, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York launched a joint emergency campaign that raised

unprecedented support for Israel and set the organizations on a path that culminated in their 1986 merger. When Tisch became federation president in 1980, she led the organization through a critical phase of that merger. Her son, James S. Tisch, later served as president of the merged UJA-Federation from 1998 to 2001.

Throughout it all, Greilsheimer said, Tisch’s manner never varied depending on the size or importance of the room. “Whether it was a full board meeting of 70 people, or whether it was a small executive committee meeting, she had the same manner in dealing with everybody.” She listened, she absorbed every viewpoint, and she guided the institution toward where she believed it needed to go, without ever making anyone feel unheard. “She never argued,” Greilsheimer said. “She was extraordinarily respectful.”

John Ruskay, who crossed paths with Tisch over decades of work at major Jewish institutions, including the Jewish Theological Seminary, 92NY and UJA-Federation, described her as operating at a different level than even the many extraordinary leaders he had encountered over a long career.

“Billie Tisch was unique in bringing cognitive and emotional intelligence as a leader and a fierce commitment to caring for all in Jewish life,” he told *eJP*. “She always related to everyone — whether it was a senior volunteer, a professional or a client at a human service agency — with respect, with dignity, interested to understand how they viewed the world.”

He recalled accompanying her on a visit to the Sephardic Community Center, a project she had helped bring into existence long before his time at the organization. Watching her move through the room —

engaging easily with young and old in a community far removed from her own daily world — clarified something for him. “To see her interact with young and old in the Syrian Jewish community,” he said, “it just opened my eyes.”

Tisch was also a trustee of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, focused on global Jewish relief, and received the Louis Marshall Medal from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1976. Her family’s foundations provided sustained support to the Jewish Museum, the American Friends of the Israel Museum and the PEF Israel Endowment Fund, which supports a wide range of charitable activities in Israel.

Her influence extended well beyond Jewish institutional life. A longtime trustee and chairwoman of the WNYC Board of Trustees, she was involved in the station’s transition from city ownership to an

independent nonprofit, and she remained an honorary board member until her death. The Tisch family’s support for New York University also resulted in the naming of the Tisch School of the Arts and Tisch Hospital.

At Skidmore College, she served on the board of trustees for a decade, and in 2022, the college named its largest-ever academic building project — the Billie Tisch Center for Integrated Sciences — in her honor.

Following Laurence Tisch’s death in 2003, Billie became a major shareholder in the Loews Corporation, with her net worth estimated in the billions by the time of her death. The Wilma S. and Laurence A. Tisch Foundation, established in 2011, continued her priorities: Jewish causes, higher education, the arts and health, with consistent support for UJA-Federation of New York, the Jewish Communal Fund, Lincoln Center, WNYC and New York City

service organizations, including City Harvest and Citymeals On Wheels.

What she built, Ruskey said, was more than institutional. “She and her late husband, Larry Tisch, transmitted that commitment to service and communal leadership to their children and grandchildren,” he said.

Greilsheimer described her more simply. “I remember her as a wonderful, warm, smart, very smart woman who cared a great deal about her family and the community,” she said. “It’s a model for many of us that wanted to do what she did, and may not have had the same means, but had the same interest.”

Tisch is survived by her four sons — Andrew, Daniel, James, and Thomas — and 23 grandchildren, including NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch. ♦

JUNE 5, 2026

In Altneu art exhibit, artists grapple with the end of American Jewry’s ‘Golden Age’

A new exhibition at the Upper East Side synagogue uses paintings of everyday Jewish life to explore nostalgia and identity as Jewish artists increasingly feel unwelcome in cultural spaces

By Haley Cohen

Four friends gather around a table as a waiter serves a tray of pastrami sandwiches; a Torah scroll is passed from grandfather to father and son, marking a bar mitzvah; three grandmothers sit on lawn chairs outside of a brownstone, watching passersby on a summer night.

These candid glimpses of ordinary American Jewish life, part of a new art exhibition, “Golden Age: Nostalgia for the American Jewish Century” — currently on display at the Altneu, an Upper East Side Orthodox synagogue — evoke a bygone era, before today’s historic rise in antisemitism.

“I grew up in the golden age [of North American Jewry], the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s. It was an easy time,” Jacqueline Kott-Wolle, one of the seven artists whose work is highlighted in the exhibit, told

Jewish Insider on Wednesday at an event to mark the gallery’s opening. “My memories of growing up Jewish [in Toronto] were very positive. Everybody was Jewish — even the people at my high school who weren’t Jewish were Jewish. It was a good time to be alive. [Today,] antisemitism slammed into us so hard. It shocked us.”

Kott-Wolle, who is based in Highland Park, Ill., and is the daughter of Holocaust survivors, said her oil paintings “represent the height of that time period, when we were very comfortable being Jewish.” The artwork, she said, evokes memories of the “Golden Age of American Jews,” which a 2024 piece in *The Atlantic* claimed is ending due to antisemitism stemming from both the left and right.

In addition to her six paintings displayed

in the exhibit, Kott-Wolle has a larger exhibit called “Growing Up Jewish – Art and Storytelling.” The series of 40 paintings illustrates five generations of her family photos, which have been exhibited in the Maltz Museum in Cleveland and Houston Holocaust Museum.

“[The paintings] are playful and fun, and they make us feel a little more nostalgic for something that we think or worry might be lost,” she told *JJ*, noting that displaying her work in a synagogue is a unique experience.

“The paintings resonate everywhere, but differently,” she said. “I find Jewish audiences recognize it immediately. I can’t tell you how many times someone will come up to me and say, ‘I love this painting and how come my mom is in it?’”

In more mainstream settings, her art has

also been widely embraced, she said. “It’s like our Jewish faces have been beaming into people’s TV screens forever. Our faces are familiar, so non-Jewish audiences also respond, but in a different way. Still in a very loving and receptive way.”

But amid the highest levels of antisemitism seen in generations following the Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks in Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza, many Jewish and Israeli artists no longer feel their work is welcome in non-Jewish spaces. Located in the basement of the Altneu synagogue — a Tudor Revival townhouse on East 70th Street — the new exhibit directly responds to that exclusion, according to curator Anne-Marie Helwaser and co-chairs Diana Gordon and Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, who is also Altneu’s rebbetzin.

“At a moment when openly Jewish artists are facing growing barriers in cultural spaces, we are doubling down on Jewish creativity by giving space and visibility to strongly Jewish [and] Israeli emerging art, in the heart of the Upper East Side,” said Chizhik-Goldschmidt who founded Altneu in 2022 together with her husband, Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt.

“On a deeper level, there is a spiritual component too. Visual arts is a powerful connection point for people; in the words of Rav Kook, ‘Literature and art are positioned to express the deepest of secrets hidden within the soul.’ We believe it’s an important part of our spiritual experience, to be moved, to feel a stirring in the soul when seeing a particularly evocative piece of work,” she told JI.

“As the Altneu grew, I dreamt of people coming to an Orthodox synagogue for a contemporary art show, and for those two pieces to feel utterly organic together,” said

Chizhik-Goldschmidt, who recalled growing up in the halls of New York’s museums, the granddaughter of a passionate art historian and tour guide.

“It was a major part of my upbringing, as a child of Soviet Jewish immigrants,” she told JI. “The arts were the only kind of spirituality that Jews had access to in the USSR. Now, we are blessed to be able to combine this with a sanctuary space.”

This is the fourth art exhibit the Altneu has hosted. Until now, the synagogue has focused on Israeli artists. However, the conflict with Iran made the logistics of securing their artwork nearly impossible in time for this exhibit.

The idea first came about “at a fragile moment,” said Helwaser, director of the Helwaser Gallery on Madison Avenue.

On a trip to Israel soon after Oct. 7, she recalled being moved by an exhibition by one artist who was an IDF soldier.

“He came back [from war] and started painting,” she said. “I talked to my friend, [Altneu community leader] Diana [Gordon], and thought we should show the images. We created — very improvised — an exhibition here. People responded really well.”

Once the organizers realized the Iran war would make it a challenge to bring Israeli art, they issued an open call for American Jewish artists, and the resulting meetings sparked the idea to highlight this different political moment.

“Hundreds of artists responded. I selected maybe 20 and we met with them and chose seven.

In different ways, all the selected artists were asking the same question: what does it mean to be Jewish today in America? It’s something we are concerned about,”

Helwaser continued.

Asked why she displayed the art at Altneu instead of her own gallery, Helwaser admitted she never expected to curate for a synagogue. She explained that unlike gallery visitors, this audience comes for the story and to connect with the artists rather than just the art.

“We don’t need Altneu for art, we have the best galleries in the world in New York,” she continued. “[Visitors] want to talk about what it is to be Jewish. Art is a nice way to do that.”

“It’s not easy [to show Israeli artwork] in New York City galleries now,” said Helwaser. “I would do it but I’d be worried. In London, you wouldn’t be able to do it. Israeli artists here [are afraid] to be shown as Israeli.”

In addition to Kott-Wolle, participating artists are: Rotem Amizur, Nicole Gordon, Noa Ironic, Alan Richards, Ephraim Wuensch and Allison Zuckerman.

Paintings are priced between \$600-\$52,000. Many of the buyers are not Jewish, according to Helwaser. The exhibit is scheduled to run until July 6.

The opening night brought a diverse crowd of Jews together, including many newcomers to the synagogue — from those wearing black yarmulkes and sheitels to others sporting piercings and tattoos. “That’s the beauty of Manhattan, and of the Altneu as a gathering point. It goes beyond denomination,” said Chizhik-Goldschmidt.

The artwork appears to be resonating. At the debut, one guest was overheard gesturing toward a painting and remarking to a friend, “This is nostalgia for me. This is exactly how American grandmothers looked when I was growing up.” ♦