

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JUNE 15, 2026

## A Lebanese Zionist's longshot bid to reshape the Middle East

*Hagar Hajjar Chemali, who is half Jewish and half Christian, thinks she has a shot at helping break through the deep sectarianism that has led to distrust both within Lebanon and towards Israel*

By Gabby Deutch

**H**agar Hajjar Chemali is an American by accident — quite literally — of birth.

Her parents left their native Lebanon in 1981 as a civil war raged in the country. Chemali's father, Hadi, had been kidnapped by a political group, and the young couple quickly left the country once he was released, with plans to move to Milan. While visiting friends in Greenwich, Conn., Chemali's mother, Mirella, began experiencing pregnancy complications and chose to wait out the final months of her pregnancy there. Soon after, Chemali was born, followed quickly by a son. The family never left.

So began Chemali's American story, the result of a potent combination of determination and coincidence. That's the story of Chemali's professional journey, too: a mix of persistence and being in the right place at the right time. She spent the first decade of her career helping steer U.S. foreign policy on the Middle East in the Bush and Obama administrations, ultimately becoming the spokesperson for former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power. She spent the next decade as a consultant and

communications expert, appearing regularly on cable news and a YouTube channel where she produces an occasionally satirical show explaining American foreign policy.

Now Chemali, 44, faces her biggest and most personal assignment yet: creating an unofficial backchannel to boost the ongoing peace talks between Lebanon and Israel, the first time that officials from the two countries have sat for direct talks since 1983. And Chemali, who is half Jewish and half Christian, thinks she has a shot at helping break through the deep sectarianism that has led to distrust both within Lebanon and towards Israel.

The deal between the U.S. and Iran that was announced on Sunday may complicate Chemali's efforts. Iran's attempt to link its own negotiations with the U.S. to developments in Lebanon could potentially complicate efforts to advance Israeli-Lebanese peace, and Iranian state media said on Sunday that Lebanon would be part of the new deal. Details remain scarce.

"It's about the art of the possible. Lebanese-Israeli peace is not particularly easy to achieve," said Daniel Glaser, a former as-

sistant Treasury secretary for terrorist financing and financial crimes. He hired Chemali for her first job at the Treasury Department. "What's going to get it done is the ability to understand what's possible, and how to get to that possible within the U.S. system, within Israel and the Israeli system, within Lebanon and the infinitely complicated Lebanese system. There's not a lot of people that have the ability to do that more than Hagar."

In April, she announced the creation of an organization called LIPA, the Lebanon-Israel Peace Alliance. It's a vessel for advocacy by Chemali and a cadre of Israeli, Lebanese and American foreign policy experts she colloquially describes as the "peace crew" — many do not yet want to publicize their involvement with the effort — who are working to keep the pressure on the U.S. government to help broker a deal between Lebanon and Israel.

The group has been collaborating since early last year, soon after Israel and Lebanon reached a ceasefire in late 2024 that ended the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah that began when the Iranian-backed group

launched missiles at Israel on Oct. 8, 2023. The effort gained traction amid a broader shift in Lebanon: Hezbollah was weakened by the death of its longtime leader, Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, and newly elected Lebanese President Joseph Aoun moved to reassert state authority over Hezbollah's power and influence.

"She was one of the very first people that said to me that I should go for peace," said Morgan Ortagus, who served as deputy Middle East special envoy at the beginning of the Trump administration. Ortagus and Chemali have been friends since they worked in the Treasury Department together nearly 20 years ago. "I said, 'Really, do you think they're ready?' And she was emphatic that she thought that it was the time to go for peace."

The work of Chemali's burgeoning "peace crew" solidified in March, at a dinner soon after the Iran war started. The geopolitical time crunch of a fast-moving war spurred the group to come up with a name to formalize the informal diplomacy they had been pursuing for more than a year.

"All this work actually helped bring the Israelis and the Lebanese governments to hold direct talks in Washington," said Hanin Ghaddar, a senior fellow studying Lebanon at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I don't think this would have been possible without the whole year of work on the narrative and the policy and the recommendations and the shift on the ground, that this is where Lebanon and Israel finally decided, 'Let's do this.'"

After the U.S. and Iran agreed to a ceasefire in early April, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israel would open direct negotiations with Lebanon. It was the moment for which Chemali had yearned for over 18 months — or, perhaps, a whole lifetime. In the aftermath of the first round of talks, LIPA was launched in the way so many projects are: via a somewhat haphazard post on X. Chemali did not want to lose her chance at creating momentum for a window for peace that might soon close. She has not returned to Lebanon in 15 years due to security risks.

"As a comms person, I would never advise a rollout this way. This is like the opposite of what you do before a rollout. You have all your ducks in a row when you roll anything

out," Chemali told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview at a Washington cafe. "We wanted to come out there and be like, we have an organization that exists that is there to support this process."

For Chemali, the effort is a culmination of her own professional arc, as well as the choices her parents made in building a life here. Her family might be Lebanese, but this effort is all-American — something she can do because of where she was born and the circumstances that allowed her to rise to a public, senior government role without having to worry about the strict sectarian divisions that govern Lebanese society and the country's government.

But there was a piece of Chemali's story that was missing, something that now makes her uniquely positioned to serve as a convener of Lebanese and Israelis here in the U.S.

"She's half-Jewish and half-Christian," said Hussain Abdul-Hussain, a Lebanese-Iraqi researcher at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "She has the highest pedigree for someone to be working on this issue."

Chemali did not know about her Jewish roots when she was growing up. Her father is a Maronite Christian, a Catholic sect with deep roots in the Levant. The family attended a nondenominational church in Connecticut. When Chemali was 11 or 12, her mother revealed a secret she had kept since her children were born: She was Jewish.

"I think she just couldn't take it anymore. She was just like, 'Actually, I'm Jewish,'" Chemali recalled. "My brother and me, being raised in the United States, we were like, 'That is so cool. Does that mean we get Hanukkah gifts?'"

Her mother, Mirella, grew up in Wadi Abu Jamil, Beirut's Jewish neighborhood. She attended a Catholic school at the urging of the family of her late father. The nuns at her school would tell Mirella that "she had evil in her blood because she was Jewish," according to Chemali. "So [her family] practiced Judaism in secret at home."

The revelation from her mother intrigued Chemali. *Why didn't she tell them sooner?* Mostly Chemali ignored it, until she came to Washington during the George W. Bush administration. She joined the Treasury Department in 2006, in the newly created Of-

fice of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, where many of her colleagues were Jewish. They started inviting her to Shabbat dinners and Jewish holidays. Chemali learned more about Judaism, and began to feel proud of that part of her identity. When she moved back to Greenwich, she asked her mom to teach her more about her family's traditions.

"I told my mom, 'These traditions die with you. You didn't raise me with these traditions. I only know what I know from books and from going with friends to their houses for events,'" Chemali said. So her mom bought a menorah, and they lit candles together for Hanukkah.

"She starts singing in Hebrew, and I was like, 'Who is this woman who sings in Hebrew?' As far as I knew, she speaks a lot of languages — actually, she speaks five languages — but Hebrew was not one of them," said Chemali.

Chemali has not abandoned the Christian faith she was raised with, even as she grapples with her identity.

"What I tell people of where I am at the moment, but it is always an evolution, is that I am of Christian faith and feel very much a Jew," said Chemali. "I always tell people I'm a member of every tribe."

Lebanon is so beset by tribal division that different government positions are reserved for people from different religious sects: the president is required to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of parliament is a Shia Muslim. Chemali has refused to diminish any part of her identity, even as her home country all but demands she pick a side.

"She's someone who can actually speak to everyone. She's not there to take sides," said Ghaddar. "She really sees the whole picture, and I think that's what this kind of initiative really needs. It's someone who has a stake in everyone and everything."

Chemali retains the idealism that so many lose after decades in Washington. She described herself as a "Lebanese Zionist," a position she said she has stuck by even amid the polarization that crept into her family after Oct. 7.

"This is the thing that sets me apart from the rest of my family. There's a chunk of my family that unfriended me on social media after Oct. 7 because of my statements — and by the way, my statements are not like,

'Yeah, go into Gaza and get 'em.' That's not what I'm saying. My statements were more posting about the hostages," said Chemali. "There's one chunk of my family from Syria on my dad's side that, straight up, they will lecture me at any opportunity they have. I view them as brainwashed, to be perfectly honest, and they probably view me as brainwashed."

Chemali recalled a trip to Lebanon during her time as the National Security Council's director for Lebanon and Syria in the Obama administration. A Lebanese friend advised her not to share that she's Jewish.

"I was like, 'Look, that's not how I operate,'" said Chemali. "First, I really make sure religion doesn't come up in my government work, because I don't want anyone ever accusing me of seeing something through a religious lens. But secondly, if it comes up, I don't hide. That's not how I roll, ever."

Still, she understands that not everyone can be as visible as she is. Chemali gave up her Lebanese citizenship before entering the U.S. government, but ordinary Lebanese people face steep prison sentences simply for talking to Israelis because of the country's anti-normalization laws. Free from these restrictions, Chemali has recently taken to setting up discreet dinners between Lebanese and Israelis in Washington.

"We are trying to come up with creative ways to work around these laws," she said. "We have to pick locations where nobody will see them or recognize them, so it makes it much more difficult."

One of LIPA's priorities is urging the U.S. to pressure Lebanon to repeal those laws. Chemali holds meetings with members of Congress on both the left and right. She talks to contacts at the State and Treasury Departments regularly, advocating for new sanctions on Hezbollah. She's a fixture in Foggy Bottom and at wonky Middle East

conferences, on cable news and in cafes, all from her home base in Connecticut.

"The ideal is a warm peace where you have thriving business relations, and that's how our efforts are geared, toward that vision," said Chemali. "That will hopefully undermine Hezbollah's presence."

After a new round of talks early this month, the governments of Lebanon, Israel and the U.S. released a joint statement in which Lebanon's army agreed to create "pilot zones" where it will exert control and ban Hezbollah, the Iran-backed militia that uses southern Lebanon as a base to attack Israel. The diplomats will meet again later this month, and military representatives from each country will hold their own parallel track. The talks are testing the Lebanese government's appetite for taking a stand against the militia. Meanwhile, Israel and Hezbollah continue to trade blows even as the talks proceed.

That negotiations are happening at all reflects unprecedented discontent within Lebanon toward Hezbollah. Until now, Lebanon's leaders have been unable or unwilling to exert the strength needed to push back on Hezbollah's grip over the country's politics. Earlier this month, Aoun, the country's president, took the unusual step of criticizing Iran, Hezbollah's primary backer: "It's not your country, it's our country," he told CNN.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro called the peace talks a "tremendous opportunity" for both countries.

"Maybe more for Lebanon than for Israel, because it really would mean breaking free from the handcuffs of Hezbollah and Iran," said Shapiro. He hired Chemali for her job at the Obama White House and said he is encouraged by her efforts with LIPA.

"Having a strong advocacy body in the United States perhaps buttressed by those in Europe and elsewhere in the region is im-

portant fuel to that process," said Shapiro. "She's got just endless energy and creativity and a real commitment."

The biggest challenge is that Lebanon's leadership does not control Hezbollah. Peace between Israel and Lebanon would still be momentous even without dealing with Hezbollah, but it would leave the most intractable issue unresolved.

"It's not the elephant in the room, because they all talk about it. But the crux of this is Hezbollah and Hezbollah's weapons, and it's not just the disarmament of them, it's ensuring that they're never able to rearm again," said Chemali.

Washington is easily distracted; Trump is no exception. For Chemali, who is not directly involved in the talks, perhaps the most urgent task is to make sure the people in the room do not move on. She needs to remind them that the Lebanon-Israel file remains important, and worth pursuing — and that it should not be subsumed up by negotiations between the U.S. and Iran.

"We keep our fingers crossed, we advocate, we speak up, publish op-eds, you name it. Go on interviews, whatever it takes, just to make sure that things keep on going in the peace direction," said FDD's Abdul-Hussain, who is friends with Chemali but is not formally collaborating with her. "People like us, who are not governments, who are just regular people, we have a bigger margin. We have a lot of freedom to move. We have a lot of freedom to explain things, or to oppose things."

But even in the perpetually explosive Middle East, where the talks could easily fall apart, Chemali believes something fundamental has changed.

"No matter what happens with the talks, there's a reason I have hope," she said. "Because you see this taboo in Lebanon has broken." ♦

JUNE 17, 2026

## How the Israel-Diaspora relationship is the major issue not on the ballot in the upcoming elections

*As Israel and U.S. Jewry drift apart, figures on both sides of the Atlantic wonder if a change in government is enough to bring them back together*

By Rachel Gutman

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

**T**he bill to dissolve Israel's Knesset passed its first reading earlier this month with 106 lawmakers in favor and none against, setting in motion a process that could move national elections up from Oct. 27 to as early as Sept. 8. (Discussions are ongoing about the specific date.)

The vote — unanimous across coalition and opposition parties alike — came against a backdrop of collapsing coalition discipline, a Haredi draft dispute, ongoing efforts by the government to advance a controversial judicial overhaul, the wars with Hezbollah and Iran and the potential renewal of large-scale fighting in Gaza.

As Israel's opposition parties are gearing up for what promises to be a heated election season, the conversations happening among liberal Israeli civil society leaders and their funders uncharacteristically border on optimistic. This is, in part, inspired by the surprising upset of the more moderate Peter Magyar's landslide victory that ended Viktor Orbán's 16 years in power in Hungary.

"We are seeing growing interest among the liberal camp in Israel in how the Hungarians managed to replace the government with people committed to the rule of law and democratic values," according to Dan Sobovitz, a Hungarian-Swiss-Israeli citizen and co-founder of DemoCrisis, a transatlantic network connecting civil society organizations across countries experiencing democratic backsliding.

"Perhaps the most important message is that until a few years ago, democratic backsliding seemed like a one-way process — the Hungarians and Poles have shown Israelis that this is not the case. We are at a junction where Israelis can stop the process of deterioration and return to the family of democratic nations," he told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. For

this group, Budapest is a data point — and the Knesset's dissolution vote is the starting point.

Seemingly on the ballot is something that extends far beyond Israel's borders: the high-stakes relationship between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, particularly American Jewry.

Surveys in recent years have shown that while American Jews continue to feel connected to Israel, their ties to the country have become increasingly strained. This could be seen most recently in a Jewish Federations of North America survey that found that a minority of American Jews — 37% — identify as Zionists, even as nearly twice that number — 71% — said that they felt an emotional connection to Israel. This distancing has been credited to multiple factors, chiefly opposing political shifts in the two communities, with Israelis generally becoming more conservative and American Jews more progressive. This has been exacerbated in recent years by Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza, a perception that Israel is not interested in making peace with the Palestinians and its neighbors, and particular issues of religion and state in Israel that have alienated the mostly Conservative and Reform American Jewish community.

The community of funders, organizers and civil society leaders invested in Israeli democratic infrastructure is asking grave questions: What happens to that relationship if the elections don't go their way? How will the continuation of the current government impact the safety and well-being of Jews around the world?

Sally Gottesman, a longtime funder of the New Israel Fund who is involved in democratic causes on both sides of the Atlantic, sees the rise in antisemitism as a direct result of Israel's politics and a threat to American Jews. "Antisemitism has risen

post-Gaza," she said. "Israel's the biggest problem Jews have. My Jewish safety is really dependent on Israel." For Gottesman, the survival of Jews everywhere depends on Israel stemming its slide toward authoritarianism. "Democracy is good for the Jews — when we're a minority and when we're a majority. How are we not working to protect it in both places?"

Jeffrey R. Solomon, senior advisor to Chasbro Investments, the family office of Charles Bronfman, and co-founder of Birthright Israel, agrees that a change of government in Israel is vital not just to American Jews' safety today, but also to the future of the Israel-Diaspora relationship, a critical underpinning for Israel's security. "If this government gets voted out, there's a chance to get the younger generation back," he told *eJP*.

"I refuse to believe that if the government doesn't change, it would be the death knell to the relationship," Solomon said. "But I think it could be 10, 15 years before we see any return."

Mickey Gitzin, acting CEO at the New Israel Fund, sees the electoral situation from both sides of the Atlantic. "It's true that Israelis support the war, but at the same time they're not happy with their current moment," he said. "No one feels safe and secure." For Israelis, it is the combination of war exhaustion, economic strain and collective trauma from Oct. 7. On the other side of the Atlantic, it looks somewhat different. "If you ask me, 'What are the priorities of our donors?'" Gitzin said, "It's settler violence and the elections. Those are the things they feel the most engaged, bugged, worried and concerned about."

For the first time, a majority of Americans sympathize more with Palestinians than with Israelis. Pew polling shows deepening American disaffection with Israeli policies

and the current government. Don Futterman, a veteran civil society leader and Israel director of the Moriah Fund, traces the damage directly to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“He has been the face of Israel for an entire generation,” Futterman told eJP. “And he’s been very explicit about spitting in the face of liberal Jewry.”

According to Futterman, Netanyahu made Israel a Republican issue beginning in 2015 when the prime minister denounced Democratic President Barack Obama’s signature foreign policy effort, the Iran nuclear deal, in an address to Congress at the invitation of Republican leadership and without the approval of the White House.

This decision of favoring evangelical Christians over American Jews and developing a transactional relationship with the American right was not, in Futterman’s view, just a diplomatic miscalculation, it was an act of genuine harm to American Jews. “I believe that liberal values are what have both protected and enabled American Jews to thrive in American society. To undermine those values is self-destructive,” he said, adding that American Jews are already paying the price and could be paying for it for a generation.

Futterman said he believes that a change of government could begin to reverse the damage — but only if American Jewish leadership is willing to make the case clearly and publicly. “Once Netanyahu is not the face of Israel, I think things can change,” he said. “But American Jewish philanthropy has to be courageous enough to say to an Israeli government and to an Israeli prime minister: You are putting us in danger. You are endangering American Jewry. Our constituents are paying the price. And to write everything [critical of Israel] off as antisemitism is both simplistic and dishonest.”

Not everyone agrees that a change of government will heal the rift between Israel and the Diaspora. Ariel Moav-Morvari, leading activist at HaReshet HaMasortit and head of public policy at the Judaism and State Policy Center at the Shalom Hartman Institute, argues that the crisis between Israel and the Diaspora runs deeper than any election outcome.

“I think the gap is more significant than people say,” he told eJP. “There’s a bigger

crisis here that doesn’t depend on the government. There are significant ideological and value gaps between the majority of the Jewish public in Israel and the majority of the Jewish public in the American Diaspora.”

Changing the government, in his view, addresses the symptom rather than the underlying condition. “People imagine that if the current coalition loses power, all of its voters will suddenly disappear from Israel. They won’t. Governments change. Different periods come and go. That’s part of the normal dynamic of a democratic state,” he said.

The gap between what the democracy camp hopes for and what the elections can realistically deliver, he argues, is wider than people acknowledge. “We’re still dealing with the aftermath of Oct. 7. Half of Israeli Jews are religious and conservative. That’s not going to change,” Moav said.

In a sharp departure from what others in Israel’s liberal camp believe, Moav sees Netanyahu himself as a symptom rather than a cause. “He currently acts as a kind of gravitational center for the right. When he’s gone, right-wing populism could become even more fragmented and chaotic. The deeper issue is Israeli society itself and the divisions within it. The voters who support Netanyahu’s approach will still exist. They don’t vanish. That’s why I think focusing entirely on Netanyahu while ignoring his voters is a huge mistake,” he said.

His diagnosis of the liberal camp’s strategic failures is pointed. “The liberal camp needs to learn how to cooperate more effectively, including with people it considers to be on the right side of the political map,” he said. Israel’s tribalism, he expects, will continue in the near term. “I hope we’ll eventually break out of this binary framework. I think that’s the most important thing that could happen. But as long as we’re stuck in this two-camp mentality, I don’t see a solution. It doesn’t work. I’ve thought about this for about 10 years,” Moav said.

That structural argument has direct implications for how the American Jewish philanthropic world engages with Israel. “American Jews naturally identify with the more liberal side of Israeli society,” Moav said. “That’s understandable and comes from good intentions. But they also need to learn how to build relationships and partnerships

with more conservative and right-wing parts of Israeli society. If there is to be a conversation among Jews, it needs to include Jews from all parts of the political spectrum.”

Moav’s argument about engaging across the full spectrum of Israeli society runs directly into its hardest test: the question of Arab political partnership. According to most of the recent polls, the democratic opposition cannot form a government without Arab parties — and yet, after Oct. 7, Moav said, he simply doesn’t see that coalition forming. The political and emotional conditions are not there.

The two-state solution, which most American Jews see as the obvious endpoint of any democratic Israeli government, has become almost unspeakable in Israeli political discourse. Moav described attending a policy forum with center-left Israelis and Americans together, and being struck by the gap: Americans could speak easily and naturally about a two-state solution. For the Israelis in the room, the term bore no relationship to their lived reality after Oct. 7. “This wasn’t a group of Netanyahu supporters,” he noted. “It was mostly people opposed to the current government.”

For the American Jewish community, Moav’s challenge is the hardest one this election cycle will pose. A change of government in the fall would matter. It would not, on its own, resolve the structural divergence between Israeli and Diaspora Jewish society that has been building for decades.

“If we’re looking at Hungary and saying, ‘They ran anti-corruption campaigns, so let’s do anti-corruption campaigns too’ — I think that’s simplistic,” Moav said. “The more useful lesson is that political situations are dynamic. People can change how they vote. Instead of copying someone else’s campaign, we should ask what would actually persuade people here.”

What’s missing, in his view, is a willingness to engage beyond the liberal camp’s comfort zone. “If we’re talking about democracy, it has to be practiced in the *demos* — the people — not only in the circus or the system,” he said. The discourse, he argues, needs to change register. “Maybe it should be less moralistic and more focused on security concerns, because that’s what Israelis are thinking about right now.”

For Gitzin, the upcoming elections are not just about Israel — they are about preserving the identity of his entire constituency: liberal-minded Israelis and American Jews alike.

For American Jews in the Diaspora, these elections have become deeply personal. “It’s not only about us,” Gitzin said. “It’s about them. They feel uncomfortable with their

own personal identity in this context. It’s not like they give to us only because we give them the solution for the problems on the ground. It gives them the need here for their Jewish identity.”

For Solomon, who has spent his career building that identity — brick by brick, Birthright trip by Birthright trip — the stakes

could not be higher. “If you think about the 2,000 years of wishing that it was relevant — and then, within our lifetimes, the wish being fulfilled — how are we so stupid as to blow it? Of all of the tragedies around Bibi’s endless reign, to me, that is the greatest tragedy.” ♦

JUNE 18, 2026

## ‘The single best diaspora experience’: Jewish leaders mark America’s 250th with open letter

*The letter urges American Jews to ‘double down’ on civic values as the country marks its 250th*

By Haley Cohen

As the U.S. approaches its 250th anniversary, American Jewish leaders have signed an open letter expressing gratitude to a nation “unlike so many others through Jewish history [that] did not merely tolerate Jewish life, but made possible its flourishing,” while also highlighting Jewish contributions to the country’s founding.

“From the earliest days of the American experiment, Jews were drawn to the promise of a nation founded not on bloodline, monarchy, or established religion, but on liberty, covenant, and the dignity of the individual,” the letter reads. “Having known the weight of persecution and exclusion, Jews recognized in America’s founding ideals something rare in human history: the possibility of belonging without surrendering our identity.”

The letter continues, “Here, Jewish immigrants arrived with little and built lives of dignity. Here, Jewish communities established synagogues, schools, charities, businesses, and institutions of civic life. Here, Jews rose not because success was guaranteed, but because freedom made striving possible.”

The letter was spearheaded by David Bernstein, CEO of the North American Values Institute, and Phil Darivoff, chairman emeritus of the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, to increase American Jewish involvement in America 250 celebrations.

“America 250 is an opportunity to express gratitude to America, the country that’s been the single best diaspora experience that Jews have ever had,” Bernstein told *Jewish Insider*. “American Jews have been an integral part of this country and its story from the very beginning and we want to remind our fellow Americans of that.”

“It’s also an opportunity to ensure that America lives up to its founding ideal,” continued Bernstein. He asserted that America’s core civic values, such as freedom of conscience and the rule of law, “are the best defense against antisemitism,” which reached historic levels in America following Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks in Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza.

“It’s incumbent on the American Jewish community to double down on those values, both because they protect us and because they allow America to live up to its highest potential,” said Bernstein.

The letter also acknowledges America’s shortcomings, noting, “America has not always lived up to its own ideals. Its history is marked by acts and periods of injustice, exclusion and failures that wounded many communities, including at times our own.”

It concludes with a call to action for American Jews.

“At a time of division, distrust, and fragmentation, we recommit ourselves to strengthening the bonds of citizenship, renewing a culture of democratic responsibility, and modeling a patriotic pluralism that makes room for deep difference within shared national purpose. We also commit ourselves to teach these values to our children and our children’s children.”

“We are proud to contribute to helping America more fully realize the promise of a more perfect union.”

Inaugural signatories include William Daroff, CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League; Ted Deutch, CEO of the American Jewish Committee; former Rep. Kathy Manning (D-NC); and author Dara Horn. ♦

JUNE 12, 2026

## A new mobile museum, a new summit and other reveals from Simon Wiesenthal Center's Chicago gala

By Rachel Kohn

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

**C**HICAGO — A violent summer storm typical of the Windy City gave way to clear skies Wednesday evening just in time for the start of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Humanitarian Award Dinner, held at Theater on the Lake overlooking Lake Michigan.

This year's honorees were Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, awarded the Simon Wiesenthal Center Medal of Valor for her lifetime commitment to combating antisemitism and defending Holocaust history, and Chicago philanthropist, civic leader and venture partner Sara Crown Star, who received the event's eponymous Humanitarian Award.

"This award is not about a single accomplishment or single initiative, or even a year or two of service. It's about a pattern of leadership over a lifetime," SWC CEO Jim Berk told the gathering before introducing Emmy Award-winning journalist Jim Rosenfield, a longtime friend of Crown Star, to present her with the award. Rosenfield spoke of Crown Star's decades of civic and philanthropic leadership, spanning education, disability rights, women's healthcare innovation and the Jewish community of Chicago and beyond.

*(Read Crown Star's acceptance speech here.)*

But the other star of the evening was not a person but a vehicle, parked on the venue's terrace and visited over the course of the evening by many of the 350 attendees who gathered to celebrate the honorees and support the organization's educational and advocacy work. With the dimensions of a large RV, navy blue and emblazoned with the word "Tolerance" in white along the length of the driver's side, Illinois' second Mobile Museum of Tolerance, or MMOT, is the newest to join the organization's national fleet, bringing the total number of vehicles to 12 and raising their anticipated

national reach to 250,000 students over the next year.

The evening included multiple unanticipated reveals as well: the announcement of a new summit for combating antisemitism; the first Chicago cohort of the organization's NextGen Leaders Program; and a first look at "Lost Paradise," a miniseries being produced by Morah Media, SWC's storytelling arm.

SWC's inaugural MMOT, a refurbished mobile home, was launched in Illinois in February 2021. That original unit is still in use but keeps closer to home in the Chicago area these days due to its age, Jessica Gall-Adediran, the organization's head of education for the Midwest and Florida regions, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. With two MMOTs now serving Illinois, SWC will be able to bring its immersive educational programming — focused on antisemitism, discrimination, media literacy and civic responsibility — to more than 30,000 middle and high school students annually, she said.

Growing up in a farming community in Omaha, Neb., Gall-Adediran learned that "life in rural America can be incredibly rewarding, but it can also be isolating," she told the audience at the gala. "Many young people in those areas grow up with little exposure to Jewish history, culture or community." The purpose of the MMOTs is to bring these educational materials and experiences to students and communities that would not otherwise readily access a comparable brick-and-mortar museum.

Each MMOT travels with a dedicated educator and each educational session is designed to fit within a 45- to 60-minute window to accommodate standard classroom schedules. Schools choose from a selection of educational modules, and classes rotate in and out of the MMOT throughout the day (the newest vehicle has a 30-person capacity). While the MMOTs primarily focus on visits with middle and high school students throughout the state

in which they serve, during non-school hours and when school is not in session, they are used for the organization's Tools for Tolerance professional educator and law enforcement training programs, as well as community events and deployment to communities dealing with acts of antisemitism and hate.

The new vehicle was fully funded by the state and its Department of Human Rights; the state's "only mandate" is that the MMOTs are committed to reaching communities throughout Illinois, Gall-Adediran told *eJP*. While the first unit "started out very humbly" with footage from the Holocaust and civil rights movement, the new one's programming is more "visceral" and interactive to better engage today's audiences, she said. "Emotion and personal stories are what draws us to history more than the numbers. That's what makes it interesting," she said. "That's what we're trying to do — find the personal that draws people in and develops empathy."

The evening's program opened with a video about Simon Wiesenthal's personal story and the mission that turned into a legacy, which segued into discussion of the resurgence of antisemitism post-Oct. 7 and the changes it fueled for the organization, a "reengineering of global operations, advocacy and education."

SWC trustee Sandy Teplitzky announced an inaugural regional summit that will bring together leaders from government, business, education, media, philanthropy, faith communities and advocacy organizations.

The Chicago Convening on Antisemitism, scheduled for November, will not be just another meeting or statement, said Teplitzky — who, along with his wife Karen, provided the seed funding for the gathering — but "a real convening of leaders all focused on one urgent question: How can we join together to dismantle antisemitism in our community?"

SWC also took the opportunity to announce the expansion of its NextGen Leaders Program to Chicago. The first cohort of 18 college students, who were present at the event and greeted with enthusiastic applause, will serve in government internships throughout the city while receiving weekly leadership training focused on confronting hate and advancing civic engagement.

SWC's education and advocacy work is well known, but Berk spotlighted the organization's storytelling arm, Moriah Me-

dia, as well. Moriah Media is designed to produce "mission-aligned" feature films and television series that entertain, inform, inspire and humanize the Jewish experience: "If other people are telling our story, we've already lost control of our own narrative," he told the gathering.

Moriah Media was behind "One Day in October," the acclaimed series available on Max that spotlights both the horrors of the Oct. 7 attacks and the stories of bravery and resilience.

Berk proudly introduced a first-look clip from one of the new shows in production, a miniseries called "Lost Paradise" that traces the story of Jewish life from the shtetls of Eastern Europe to the birth of Hollywood and the establishment of the modern Jewish state.

The funds raised at the dinner will go toward supporting SWC's expanding Midwest initiatives. (A representative for SWC said the event raised "a record amount" but declined to disclose a dollar figure.) ♦

**JUNE 15, 2026**

## Treasury guidance offers boost to Jewish groups preparing for new education tax credit

*JFNA is working with its network of local Jewish federations to prepare for when the new scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs) are allowed to begin operating*

**By Gabby Deutch**

**J**ewish advocacy groups are celebrating a new set of wonky tax guidelines released last week by the Treasury Department that offer clarity into a new federal education tax credit that they hope will help more Jewish families access day school education.

Education-focused nonprofits have been awaiting guidance from the federal government about the program, which provides a dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for people who donate up to \$1,700 to organizations that fund certain approved education expenses, like private school tuition and tutoring costs.

Final guidance on the tax credit regarding regulations for the organizations, and where and how they can operate, as well as who will be able to receive the scholarship funds, are not expected to be issued until September. But last week, Kevin Salinger, the Treasury Department's deputy assistant secretary for tax policy, did a whirlwind tour of virtual briefings with nonprofits to preview the forthcoming new guidance. Treasury also hosted an in-person briefing for stakeholders that included representat-

ives from the Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel.

"The substance of the preview was very positive, and it was very positive for parents, for all families, for people who send their kids to public schools, to Jewish day schools and to private schools," Sheila Katz, chief Jewish life officer at the Jewish Federations of North America, told *Jewish Insider* on Friday.

Passed as part of Republicans' 2025 spending package, called the "One Big Beautiful Bill" by President Donald Trump, the federal education tax credit will formally get off the ground in 2027.

JFNA is working with its network of local Jewish federations to prepare for when the new scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs) are allowed to begin operating. The group wants people to know about the tax break they could be able to receive if they support SGOs operating within the Jewish community. Jewish organizations believe that the bump in giving prompted by the tax credit will substantially increase the amount of scholarship funds available to help Jewish children attend day schools.

Most of the conversation about the program is happening among philanthropists, educators and administrators; it is too early for all but the most plugged-in community members to be tracking the latest developments. Still, Jewish professionals working to advance the program say that the new messaging from the Treasury Department allows them to better communicate with stakeholders ahead of the program's official launch.

"We've been making sure that everyone is updated, so school leaders, parents, donors, people interested in starting SGOs — really, we want to make sure that every single person, no matter what role they play as a donor, as a scholarship recipient, as a school, have all the information needed to make this the success that it can be," said Sydney Altfield, CEO of Teach Coalition, the Orthodox Union's advocacy arm that supports Jewish day schools.

One open question for Jewish organizations is whether each separate SGOs needs to be created in each state, or if those organizations could operate across state lines.

The new guidance clarifies that SGOs can fund scholarships in multiple states.

“There is opportunity for a larger-scale SGO to help minimize community resources, and open up so many different operations,” said Altfeld. “There could be a national Jewish SGO that helps every single Jewish day school, Orthodox, not Orthodox, whatever it may be.”

One of the biggest question marks has been which states will participate in the program, which requires states to opt in. Many Democratic governors have been hesitant to do so, wary that they will be seen as

promoting school choice programs and undermining public schools.

The Treasury Department clarified last week that the SGOs can support public school students, which had previously been uncertain. Public schools are tuition-free, but the SGOs will be able to fund tutoring programs for public school students or support for disability inclusion.

“We were really, really pleased to hear their commitment to making this work for public schools,” said Katz.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis was the first Democrat to pledge to opt into the program. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat,

said last month that she will opt the Empire State into the tax initiative. Many other states with large Jewish communities, including Pennsylvania, New Jersey and California, have not yet weighed in. Altfeld said that Teach Coalition’s focus for the rest of this year will be to convince Democratic governors to get on board.

“We are laser focused in making sure that other governors really understand it the way that [Hochul] understands it, of leaving money on the table for public school students,” said Altfeld. ♦

**JUNE 16, 2026**

## **Ivanka Trump unveils Meta initiative to distribute AI glasses to visually impaired veterans**

*The initiative, timed with America’s 250th anniversary, was inspired by a Desert Storm veteran who lost his sight in combat*

**By Christina Sher**

**I**vanka Trump on Friday announced a collaboration between Meta and the Blinded Veterans Association that aims to donate Ray-Ban Meta AI glasses to all legally blind American veterans, which the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates number roughly 130,000. The event was co-hosted by Meta and UFC.

Speaking at a Freedom 250 reception at Ned’s Club Washington, Trump said Meta will “give every blind veteran in America a free pair of glasses as just a small way to say thank you for your service.”

The initiative was spearheaded by Trump alongside Meta President Dina Powell McCormick, who served as deputy na-

tional security advisor for strategy in the first Trump administration.

Speaking at the reception, Powell McCormick said that Meta believes “superintelligence is going to help people find their purpose in life.” On “CBS Morning,” Powell McCormick said she “can’t think of a better way to honor America’s 250th birthday than by giving those who have sacrificed so much a way to make their lives better.”

The program was inspired by Don Overton, an 82nd Airborne Division Army veteran who lost his sight in Desert Storm and worked with Meta’s wearables team.

As detailed on the Ray-Ban website, the glasses can read text and describe surroundings on command, and are increas-

ingly prescribed as an assistive aid. Upon verbal activation, the 12-megapixel camera feature collects visual stimuli to be translated into audio output through open-ear speakers, allowing sight-impaired users to live more independently. Call a Volunteer, another voice-triggered feature, connects the wearer with a person for situations needing human judgment.

The Ray-Bans will be distributed at VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers, where BVA representatives are to provide training for the glasses’ use.

Clinics and rehabilitation centers have already implemented the Meta technology, according to Optometry Times. ♦

JUNE 16, 2026

## Amir Tibon wins Sami Rohr Prize for dramatic chronicle of Oct. 7

*The book details the Tibon family's experiences on Oct. 7 and examines the history of Israel's Gaza policy*

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By Christina Sher

Israeli journalist Amir Tibon was awarded the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature on Tuesday for *The Gates of Gaza: A Story of Betrayal, Survival, and Hope in Israel's Borderlands*, his harrowing account of survival on Oct. 7.

*The Gates of Gaza* is Tibon's first-person account of the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terror attacks and Israel's Gaza policies as a resident of the border's region. On the day of the attack, he, along with his wife and their two young daughters, spent 10 hours hiding in the safe room of their home in Kibbutz Nahal Oz, less than a mile from Gaza, as terrorists rampaged through the community.

In the book, Tibon details efforts by his father, a retired major general in the IDF, traveled from Tel Aviv by car to rescue the

family, stopping numerous times along the way to assist others and fight groups of terrorists. *The Gates of Gaza* intersperses Tibon's accounting of the day, his parents' experiences and Israeli government policy regarding Gaza over the years.

"The mission of the Rohr Prize has never been more important," Tibon, a reporter for *Haaretz*, said, "as we confront a rising tide of antisemitism around the globe and its unique ripples within the world of books and literature."

The book also received the 2024 National Jewish Book Award, the Wingate Prize and the Bernstein Prize.

After evacuating the kibbutz, Tibon and his family have lived in northern Israel since the attacks.

The awards ceremony, to be held at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem on July 28, will mark the 20-year anniversary of the prize, which comes with a \$100,000 award.

The Rohr Prize honors emerging contemporary writers whose work shows promising continuing contribution to literature in the Jewish sphere. The award annually alternates between fiction and non-fiction.

Nonfiction authors Laura Hobson Faure, Shaul Kelner and Jordan Salama were on the shortlist of finalists for this year's prize. Winners from previous years include Sasha Vasilyuk for her novel *Your Presence is Mandatory*, and Oren Kessler for his *Palestine 1936*. ♦