

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JULY 13, 2026

Tributes pour in after death of Lindsey Graham, Israel's staunch defender in the Senate

Trump, Cruz, Fetterman, Coons and Jewish organizations remembered the South Carolina Republican, who died suddenly at 71

By Emily Jacobs

As President Donald Trump returned to Washington on the first Sunday of the new year, he was joined by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who had traveled to the president's Mar-a-Lago estate a day earlier to be with Trump after he ordered the operation that deposed Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Graham, 71, had been encouraging Trump since returning to office last January to take a more aggressive posture toward the Maduro regime, and vigorously defended the president's decision to launch a series of strikes targeting Venezuelan boats that the Trump administration alleged were carrying drugs meant to reach U.S. soil. By late October, he was calling on Maduro to flee Venezuela and cede power as tensions between Trump and the dictator escalated.

During an impromptu press conference aboard Air Force One, Trump and Graham defended the merits of the operation and predicted that the Cuban regime was likely to fall as a result of the mission. The South Carolina senator, one of the most hawkish Republican lawmakers on foreign policy, grinned as he heralded the mission as a

success.

"When I was on Air Force One with the president flying back and we did that news conference, if you thought I was smiling big on the outside, you have no idea how much I was smiling on the inside," Graham told *Jewish Insider* in an interview shortly after arriving in Washington with the president. "This is the best time in my political life because I've aligned myself with the strongest president in modern times. We're getting results that are making this world safer and America more prosperous."

By that time, more than 10 years after rejecting Trump's candidacy and decrying him as a "race-baiting, xenophobic bigot" whose rhetoric would "kill my party," Graham had become one of the president's closest allies in the Senate and a close confidante on foreign policy matters.

"This is what happens when you stay in his orbit, realizing there's far more good than bad and understanding that this man has magic that nobody on the planet has," the South Carolina senator told *JL*. "It's not so much that I'm on a roll. It's the fact that talking with President Trump, he is embracing policies that he calls common

sense, and the small part I play on the end of this, I'm so proud of."

Following Graham's sudden passing this weekend, Trump somberly reflected on the loss of his friend, political confidante and golfing partner, praising the late senator for his political acumen and his patriotism in a pair of media interviews and two social media posts.

"He's a tough one to lose. He was great. He was unique in every way, actually," Trump told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday morning of Graham. "He was really a worker. ... He was a great politician, actually."

"He was such an advocate if he wanted to get something. He had a unique ability, he was able to deal with Democrats. If I had a problem, a real problem, I wouldn't often ask, but if I had a problem with a Democrat, he could work it out," he continued. "There was nobody like him. He loved being a politician, and he was going to win his election [in November for a fifth Senate term]. ... He just had it made."

Graham passed away on Saturday evening after returning from a congressional delegation that included

stops in Kyiv, Ukraine, and Ankara, Turkey, for last week's NATO summit.

The South Carolina senator arrived to his Capitol Hill townhome late Saturday afternoon and began making phone calls to Republican political allies in the early evening about legislative business, developments in the Middle East and to share details of his recent trip, according to two sources with direct knowledge.

One of those calls was to the president. Another was to Morgan Ortagus, the former deputy presidential envoy for Middle East peace in the second Trump administration and one of Graham's closest confidantes in Washington. The president said that Graham mentioned being "tired" during their conversation, but noted that "he was fine" and expressed shock at his sudden passing. Ortagus told JI on Sunday afternoon that Graham was upbeat during their final conversation, expressing optimism that Trump was coming around on supporting his Russia sanctions bill and with resuming military operations in Iran.

"Nobody was expecting this. That's for sure. Not even Lindsey was, or he wouldn't have been running for another term," Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-ND), who has had close relationships with both Graham and Trump, said of the senator's sudden passing. "When a person cuts as wide a swath as Lindsey cuts, it is shocking. It will take some time to process the reality of it. It should really hit on Monday when we show up for work."

It came as a shock to Trump, Ortagus and everyone else in Graham's orbit when his office announced his passing in the early hours of Sunday morning, which the Washington D.C. medical examiner's office, in a preliminary autopsy report, attributed to aortic dissection caused by arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease.

"He was extremely jazzed up in our last conversation. He had just gotten off the phone with the president, and he was super excited about the Russia sanctions bill and the president deciding to go back into Iran," Ortagus told JI. "He could not have been happier when I spoke to him last night. He was in the best mood and in a great place.

He spoke about how he felt like he was doing consequential work."

Asked about his phone call with Graham during his "Meet the Press" appearance — on which Graham had been scheduled to appear — Trump said, "I just can't believe it. He was like a member of the family to me. It's very tough, actually. It's amazing."

Trump and Graham formed an unlikely relationship over the course of the first Trump administration, finding common ground with the establishment of the Abraham Accords and the confirmation of the president's Supreme Court nominees.

Graham briefly broke with Trump in the immediate aftermath of the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot, condemning the attack and recognizing Biden's 2020 victory. But within months, Graham was regularly visiting Trump at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla., and publicly urging his party to rally around the president's bid for a second term in 2024.

"He genuinely had a fantastic relationship with President Trump. They really actually liked each other a lot. I think Trump was his best friend in many ways," Ortagus said. "He loved the president. It was genuine. They were incredibly good friends."

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Graham got to know each other as members of the Senate Judiciary Committee and on the presidential campaign trail in 2016. The two developed a close working relationship in the last decade, finding common ground on economic and foreign policy issues that pitted them against the expanding populist wing of the GOP.

Speaking to JI on Sunday, Cruz said that Graham and Trump "became close friends. Lindsey would call the president early in the morning, late at night and at every hour in between. And the president listened to him. He didn't always agree, but he trusted him and he knew that Lindsey was speaking from the heart."

"[Senate Majority Leader] John Thune (R-SD) is going to miss him terribly. Donald Trump is going to miss him terribly," Cramer told JI. "It confounds them, MAGA world. They love Donald Trump and can't stand Lindsey Graham, so they're befuddled by the relationship."

Cramer noted that Trump has developed political alliances with several former critics, the most notable example being Vice President JD Vance, who was similarly disapproving of the president during the 2016 election. Like Graham, the vice president became an avid defender of Trump during the president's first term.

While both men found their way into the president's orbit, they remained on opposing sides of the conservative movement, with Vance becoming one of the leading GOP voices wary of U.S. military engagement abroad and Graham emerging as a leading force behind the effort to maintain an engaged foreign policy.

"With Lindsey, he was talented," Cramer said. "He was bright and he knew things that a lot of people don't know. He had a historical perspective a lot of people don't have. He had a Rolodex that's probably in several languages, and he called you from all kinds of time zones. You never knew where he was when he called."

Despite having those conservative detractors, following his death, Graham was lauded for his humor, his friendship and his public and private support for Trump by those in the president's orbit — including Vance and other prominent Trump administration officials who were not often ideologically aligned with the late senator.

"Early in my Senate tenure, I remember getting into a shouting match with Lindsey about a Ukraine funding bill at lunch and then learning the very next day that he was pushing rail legislation I really cared about behind the scenes," Vance wrote on X. "That was Lindsey Graham. He fought like hell for the things he believed in, and he was just as willing to go to bat for you when it counted."

"Lindsey had the best sense of humor in the Senate. He loved the game of politics. He was constantly asking which races were up and down, and how he could help," the vice president continued. "As he liked to say, 'I don't care if you're an isolationist or a religious fanatic, so long as you have an R next to your name, I want you to win.' We certainly had our disagreements. But I couldn't help but like him. A one of a kind figure in our politics."

Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff for policy and a longtime Trump advisor, described Graham as a cherished ally to the president in implementing the administration's policy goals and spoke of telling the late senator "what his friendship meant to me and to us all."

"I cannot describe to you how much joy President Trump's leadership and friendship brought to Lindsey," Miller wrote on X. "Meetings with Graham at the White House were filled with camaraderie, kinship and uproarious laughter."

"The fact that Lindsey started out as a political opponent only to become one the President's most steadfast and faithful supporters underscores that Lindsey believed emphatically in the voice of the people," he explained.

Miller described Graham as "a senator's senator" and praised his ability to "move a room," calling it "a glorious thing to witness."

Sander Gerber, the CEO of Hudson Bay Capital and the architect of the Taylor Force Act, the passage of which Graham championed, told JI, "Lindsey was a maverick. He didn't care about convention. He cared about doing what was right. When Lindsey set his mind to something, he was going to deliver on it, and he had a keen sense of the politics to be successful at that. He should be remembered as one of the greatest champions for Israel among members of Congress."

"As heartbreaking as his sudden passing is, I hope it will bring some measure of comfort to those who cherished him to know just how much he was living his dream every day," Miller said. "Very rarely in life do you get to be exactly where you want to be, when you want to be there, with who you want to be with, doing precisely what you want to do — that was every moment for Lindsey."

Many of those who spoke about Graham after his passing described the South Carolina Republican, who spent more than two decades in the Senate, as a professional at navigating choppy political waters

"He wasn't just a good talker, he had depth," Cramer said. "He knew what the

hell he was talking about. He had interesting insights."

"In order to get things done in Congress, to actually make a difference, you need to have the relationships," Gerber said. "Lindsey was able to cultivate those relationships, and that's what enabled him to get things done. There are 100 senators, but he was able to get his voice to stand out and to drive policy forward."

Republicans and Democrats alike predicted Graham would be remembered as a legendary American political figure known for his ability to take political risks and find common ground in unexpected places.

"There was not a fight on domestic or foreign affairs that he didn't want to jump into," Ortagus said of Graham. "If he believed in an issue and believed that a particular policy was the right thing, he really didn't care about the politics. Ultimately, he wouldn't change what he believed was right based on politics, and that's in very short supply politically right now."

Ret. Gen. David Petraeus, the former director of the CIA and head of U.S. Central Command, told JI that Graham's legacy would be "that of someone who was fiercely committed to the enduring principles, values and freedoms that we cherish, and who had the political skills and determination to see what he supported promoted by legislation, policies and strategies."

"Sen. Graham's dedication to the state of Israel and to the Jewish people was deeply sincere. We talked about it all the time. I went to Israel with him many times," said Morgan Ortagus, the former deputy presidential envoy for Middle East peace in the second Trump administration and one of Graham's closest confidantes in Washington. "He was a Southern Baptist and believed in the importance of the Jewish state to his core, and was willing to defend it."

"I think he would be pleased to hear me say that he was not just adept, but was diabolically creative when necessary to achieve the outcomes to which he was committed," Petraeus said.

Many of Graham's allies said they expect his longstanding support for Israel and his commitment to aiding Ukraine in Russia's war against it to be signature pieces of his foreign policy legacy.

"We talked a lot in the past year about the rise of antisemitism and anti-Zionism in both parties. He was very close to my daughter and she called him 'Uncle Lindsey,'" she continued. "I would always remind him that I have a Jewish daughter and that throughout our history, the Jewish people have always thought we were safe until we weren't."

Ortagus said she and Graham "agreed that we have to fight antisemitism back in our party, that it can't be allowed to fester. He would always talk about how important it was. He had deeply held personal beliefs on what America's relationship with Israel should be. There was nothing cynical or craven about it."

Cruz described Graham as "a passionate and formidable defender of Israel" and noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "trusted Lindsey and listened to him."

"Lindsey loved the nation of Israel. He loved the people of Israel, and he believed ferociously in defending and strengthening America's friendship and alliance with Israel," the Texas senator said of his late colleague. "Now, Lindsey would sometimes tell his friends messages they didn't want to hear. Lindsey was not one to just blow smoke. He would tell people exactly what he thought, but that made him an incredibly effective advocate for Israel."

"Lindsey understood that standing with Israel is overwhelmingly in America's national security interests," he continued. "He and I collaborated very closely on articulating why standing with Israel makes America safer, that the enemies of Israel, whether Hamas or Hezbollah or Iran, are the enemies of America as well."

Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) credited Graham with doing "a masterful job of pulling" senators from across the ideological spectrum "in the same direction" in the immediate aftermath of Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, swiftly organizing a bipartisan congressional delegation alongside former

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD) to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt as he sought to salvage his longstanding efforts to achieve Saudi-Israeli normalization.

"It was an incredible trip, and all of us said it was just one of the most consequential, constructive trips we'd ever been on," Coons told JI. "[Sen.] Katie Britt (R-AL) came on the trip. It was one of her first trips as a senator, I think. Think about the range of members who we had. We had [Sens.] Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Dan Sullivan (R-AK) in the same meeting."

"Even though it was two weeks after Oct. 7 and it was in the middle of that shock, he knew what he was doing," Coons continued. "He was building a coalition of supporters for the deal that he was hoping he could pull off."

Coons was one of several people to point to Graham's well-documented friendships with the late Sens. John McCain (R-AZ) and Joe Lieberman (I-CT), known as the Senate's "three amigos," as an important part of his legacy.

"I think he continued McCain's legacy of fighting for freedom, and he never gave up on the possibility of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict," Coons said. "That was his prize."

"He was not afraid to be critical and he was never uncritical of friends. He believed that friends owe it to each other to try to enable them to do better," Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) said. "He had a vision, which was in effect the normalization of relationships throughout the Middle East, an extension of the Abraham Accords. He pursued it relentlessly."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), who maintains a similarly bipartisan reputation in Congress, worked with Graham frequently on foreign policy matters. Blumenthal began traveling abroad with Graham in 2012, two years after being elected to the Senate. Their first trip together was a congressional delegation to the Middle East organized by McCain. The two traveled repeatedly to Ukraine and its European neighbors since Russia's invasion, and to the Middle East since Oct. 7.

"He loved the Jewish people and he

loved the Jewish state, which was so striking to me when I first traveled with him and John McCain to Israel," Blumenthal told JI. "He and McCain loved the faith of the Jewish people, which of course is so much a part of life in Israel, but Sen. Graham also loved Israel's ingenuity and inventiveness and the prowess and scrappiness of its military."

On the Taylor Force Act, Gerber noted that he convinced Graham to push for the Palestinian Authority to end its controversial payment program to Palestinian terrorists and their families, also known as "pay-for-slay," after showing the senator video footage of the Palestinian Authority celebrating the terrorist who murdered Taylor Force, a U.S. army veteran killed by a Palestinian while visiting Israel in 2016.

"I'd shown this to many other senators, but no one was as upset as Lindsey. I remember him shaking when he saw the footage," Gerber said. "Originally, I just wanted to educate Congress about what was going on, so I was trying to meet with as many members as I could to let them know the Palestinian Authority had this institutional infrastructure in place."

Leading Jewish and pro-Israel organizations praised Graham in statements on his passing as a champion for the Jewish state and in the fight to combat rising antisemitism.

"For more than two decades in the United States Senate, his voice was a constant reminder that a strong Israel is firmly in America's national security interest, and his commitment to these principles never wavered," AIPAC said. "His many visits to Israel and his love for the Israeli people reflected not just a policy position, but a deep personal connection to the Jewish state and its citizens."

The American Jewish Committee described the late senator as "a powerful advocate for many of the issues AJC champions, including American global leadership, Israel's security, a robust North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Ukraine's defensive fight against Russian aggression."

AIPAC called Graham "a great friend and

true champion of the U.S.-Israel relationship."

The Republican Jewish Coalition released a statement from Matt Brooks, the organization's CEO, and former Sen. Norm Coleman (R-MN), the organization's national chairman, describing the late senator as "a dear friend" to both men personally and the organization as a whole.

"On a personal level, Lindsey was a man of deep loyalty, humor, and heart. He treated everyone, ally or adversary, with warmth and respect, and he built friendships across the aisle that many said were impossible in today's Washington," the statement read.

The GOP senator's slow embrace of Trump earned him criticism from constituents and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. As a former conservative House lawmaker who had fought the rise of the Tea Party movement in the early 2010s, Graham had built a reputation as a defense hawk with a penchant for bipartisanship when Trump was first elected in 2016.

Some Democrats were angered by his political pivot, especially during and after the first Trump administration, but Graham maintained strong relationships with his Democratic colleagues and continued working with them frequently on efforts to support Ukraine and other areas of agreement.

"He deeply, genuinely loved the Senate. He tried really hard to do positive things for the institution at the same time that he was a fierce partisan," Coons said of Graham. "Our fight over Kavanaugh was one of the worst I've ever had."

Another of those Democrats is Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA), who became close with Graham in the two-and-a-half years since the Oct. 7 attacks. Graham and Fetterman, whose decision to vocally support Israel amid declining support in the Democratic Party prompted his relationship with the progressive left to collapse, frequently engaged on foreign policy matters, especially related to developments in the Middle East.

Fetterman described Graham to JI as "warm, friendly and thoughtful" and called his passing "a tragedy."

"Israel lost a huge champion with

Lindsey Graham,” the Pennsylvania senator said.

Libertarian and isolationist Republicans, meanwhile, grew frustrated that such a hawkish voice was being consulted so closely on foreign policy matters in an America First administration.

“There should be a law that Lindsey Graham can only enter the White House every other week, and that he’s only to meet with under mid-level people, not the president. No more golf outings,” Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), a foe of Graham’s in the Senate Republican Conference who opposed the president’s actions in Venezuela, told reporters in January.

Across the political spectrum, those who knew Graham described him as an irreplaceable fixture in the Senate and predicted that his loss would cause many

voids in the upper chamber, where the late senator was supposed to take over as the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee next year.

“He links so many things and so many people that without him, there’s a missing link in a lot of relationships between Middle Eastern countries between members of the Senate, between Budget Committee members and leadership, between the Republicans and Democrats,” Cramer said of Graham’s expansive presence in the Senate. “We’ll find out the consequences of losing him in time like this soon, but it’ll be hard to navigate to be sure.”

“I don’t know who can play this role going forward. I just don’t see it,” Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) said. “He’s just not replaceable. There’s not going to be anyone like him again.”

Cruz told JI that, “nobody will fill that void” left by Graham’s absence, citing the respective impacts of McCain and the late Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT) to the upper chamber.

“When John McCain passed away, that was a void that was never filled. When Orrin Hatch, another longtime legend of the Senate, passed away, that was a void that was never filled,” Cruz said. “Nobody will fill Lindsey’s shoes. Others will step up and lead in different ways, but Lindsey left an indelible mark on the Senate, on the nation and on the hearts of his colleagues.” ♦

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Vance alleges Israeli influence campaigns ‘manipulating’ American opinion on Iran war

The VP warned of a ‘very discreet, extremely well-funded campaign’ by Israeli actors who want to see the war extended ‘not towards any objective, but just indefinitely’

By Gabby Deutch

Vice President JD Vance told podcaster Joe Rogan on Wednesday that he is worried American politicians are being swayed by Israeli “influence campaigns.”

In the three-hour interview on “The Joe Rogan Experience,” Vance warned of a “very discreet, extremely well-funded campaign” to derail negotiations between the U.S. and Iran.

“What does bother me is when those operations, those influence campaigns, actually affect American political judgment, because they shouldn’t. Because we should be thinking, What is in the best interest of the United States of America?”

The interview comes after a series of recent statements in which Vance has criticized Israel’s handling of the Iran war. Last month, he issued a rebuke to Israeli leaders critical of President Donald Trump’s decision to negotiate with Iran, urging them

against “attacking the only powerful ally” they have left.

“[Israel is] a country of 9 million people. We have 330 million people. And so, of course, they’re going to try to persuade Americans. They’re going to try to move Americans in one direction or another,” Vance told Rogan. He noted that Israel’s efforts to influence American foreign policy are not themselves suspect — “a lot of other countries do [it],” Vance said — but, rather, that American officials will act in ways that do not serve the American public as a result of Israel’s urging.

Vance compared these alleged Israeli efforts to influence campaigns by Qatar and Russia. “It doesn’t bother me that Qatar tries to influence the United States I like a lot of the Qataris, just like I like a lot of the Israelis It frankly doesn’t even bother me that Russia or some of these other countries do it. It’s just the nature of being a political

leader in 2026,” he said.

He also claimed such Israeli influence campaigns are supportive of war for its own sake: “There are some people within their system we know beyond a shadow of a doubt who are manipulating and trying to change American public opinion to keep the war going on indefinitely. Again, not towards any objective, but just indefinitely,” he said.

In the interview, Vance described an ongoing “massive pro-Israel, anti-Israel debate in the United States of America,” and painted himself as the “reasonable moderate” in that conversation. For that reason, Vance said, he has “been accused of being an antisemite.”

“I guess some people say that I’ve insulted the Jewish religion, which is insane. Like, I have a ton of respect for the Jewish religion,” said Vance. But even as he defended himself against charges of

antisemitism, he suggested that his accusers need to acknowledge that American political support for Israel is receding.

"I've never heard a good, compelling argument for why I'm an antisemite, even though I've been accused of being an antisemite by many people. But what I say to these guys is, look at public opinion, look at the way young Republicans versus Republicans over the age of 65 approach this issue," said Vance. "Right now, Israel is losing the public opinion battle in the United States of America. It is a simple and obvious fact. Donald Trump has said that publicly."

What he supports instead is a reevaluation of the U.S.-Israel relationship, he said.

"Israel is an ally like France or like the United Kingdom. We're going to have disagreements with them. We're going to have agreements with them," said Vance. "So my approach to this is to say, you know what? When we're partnered, great, let's work together. When we're not, let's just be honest about it. And for that, people attack me for being an antisemite or anti-Israel, and they don't see the writing on the wall, that I'm actually just the guy advocating for a normal relationship with a normal country that's based around shared interests, as opposed to based around something else."

It's a position that sounds similar to recent policy positions adopted by J Street, the progressive Israel advocacy group. J Street said in April, when it announced that

the U.S. should no longer support any foreign military aid to Israel, that the country should be treated as a "normal ally — not an exception that receives unquestioning, blank check support from the United States."

Later in the interview, in a lengthy discussion about disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, Vance agreed with Rogan's comments that some have claimed that Epstein may have been connected to the Mossad, Israel's intelligence service.

"He clearly had connections to the highest levels of American intelligence. He clearly had connections to the highest levels of Israeli intelligence," said Vance. ♦

JULY 13, 2026

In Georgia's Senate race, tough choices ahead for the state's Jewish community

Some Jewish Georgians say they feel politically homeless as they have to choose between Sen. Jon Ossoff and Rep. Mike Collins

By Marc Rod

For some Jewish voters in Georgia, this year's Senate race offers no comfortable choice. Sen. Jon Ossoff's (D-GA) votes to block weapons shipments to Israel have alienated some longtime supporters, while Republican nominee Rep. Mike Collins' (R-GA) history of inflammatory rhetoric and controversial staffing choices has made him a nonstarter for others.

It's "hard for me to support either one," Norman Radow, a major Democratic donor in Georgia and a prominent figure in Atlanta's Jewish community, told *Jewish Insider*, and called the November election in the key swing state a "tough choice for a lot of Jewish people."

"It's hard for me to imagine that I would vote for Ossoff," he said. "There would have to be some epiphany or something so outrageous about Collins that I have to do it."

But at the same time, he said that

Collins, a far-right Republican with a history of controversies — including boosting an antisemitic post on X and employing a chief of staff who was revealed to be a member of a group chat with white nationalists where he discussed efforts to free a Holocaust-denying far-right activist from prison — may be an equally unpalatable choice.

Cheryl Dorchinsky, the founder of the grassroots Atlanta Israel Coalition, similarly said that Ossoff's positions on Israel have been "incredibly disappointing" — calling it a "very good example" of why she feels "politically homeless."

Dorchinsky said she needs to look into Collins, explaining that she hadn't been aware of the antisemitism scandals that had dogged him.

"I can't say that I will be supporting Ossoff, and I hate that," Dorchinsky said. "It's just making me nauseous all around. ... I really want to feel good about voting

again, [to] like who I vote for."

The race, then, offers a stark test of how defining the Israel issue will be for Jewish voters in Georgia, especially given Collins' baggage. And they are feeling the weight of that vote in a purple state where their numbers — some 150,000 statewide — could make a difference. Ossoff defeated former Sen. David Perdue (R-GA) by about 50,000 votes out of some 4.4 million cast in 2020, helping to flip the Senate to the Democrats.

"Our vote here really, really matters," said David Lubin, a Jewish Democrat who ran for the state Senate. But, he added, "If you're a Democrat, you're struggling with Ossoff's track record on Israel." He called the election a "very tough, very difficult" choice for him and for other Democrats.

Lubin, whose daughter was killed in a terror attack in 2023 in Israel, where she had moved two years prior and was serving as a police officer, said that Ossoff "still has

time to make his case for Georgia voters and to the Jewish community,” Lubin said he’s open to voting for Collins or leaving his ballot blank in November, but he’ll give Ossoff “every opportunity” to win him over before Election Day.

But Collins’ record also raises concerns for Lubin. “That’s where people really have to sit down, they have to look at the candidate up until you go to the polls and you have to take all the information you can gather ... to make the best decision.”

In order to win his vote, Lubin said that he wants to see Ossoff make a “stronger commitment” to change his votes on Israel and engage more deeply with the Jewish community in fighting antisemitism. For Collins, Lubin said he also wants to see him engage more with the Jewish community, to be “very clear on his stance with Israel with us, and his stance on how he will fight against Jewish hatred.”

Not everyone shares the concerns about Ossoff.

Cary Levow, a supporter of pro-Israel causes and candidates who has hosted fundraising events for Ossoff, told JI that the race is not “a close call,” and that Ossoff will clearly be the stronger advocate for the Jewish community.

“Jon has been very pro-Israel, even though he’s taken a vote or two that kind of got breathlessly reported as anti- or pro-Israel, which, in my opinion, gets a little too binary,” Levow said, emphasizing that Ossoff has strong ties to and family in Israel.

Collins supporters, too, say that concerns about their candidate are overblown, and argue that he’ll be the more reliable advocate for Jewish community concerns.

Peter Korman, a Jewish Republican state committee member, said he’s known both Collins and his father, former Rep. Mac Collins (R-GA), and said that allegations of antisemitism against Collins are “slander,” emphasizing Collins’ opposition to anti-Israel protests following the Oct. 7, 2023, terror attacks.

“He stood in support of Israel. He stood in support of the Jewish population here in Georgia and across the United States,” Korman said, insisting that there is “no indication” of “any antisemitism in Mike

Collins’ background or his behavior, and I have personal experience with that.”

The wider currents at play in the Democratic Party nationwide are also figuring in the Ossoff-Collins race, observers note.

One Jewish donor in the state, who asked for anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, said they didn’t believe it was productive for the pro-Israel community to be strongly engaged in the Senate race, framing an Ossoff victory as essentially an inevitability even as they expressed disappointment with some of his votes.

The donor said some Jewish Democratic leaders have resigned themselves to voting for Ossoff despite their concerns, arguing that his positions are more moderate than those of the growing left flank of the party and that he continues to express support for Israel to pro-Israel donors.

The donor said that the more important focus for the Jewish community should be on defeating far-left candidates who don’t believe Israel has a right to exist.

In comments to JI about the concerns raised by Jewish community members, both candidates took shots at each other.

“Mike Collins is a notorious bigot whose blatantly antisemitic behavior and harassment is completely out of step with Georgians’ values and will be resoundingly rejected in November,” an Ossoff campaign spokesperson said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Collins’ campaign accused Ossoff of pandering to anti-Israel radicals, and emphasized Collins’ staunch support for Israel.

“Jon Ossoff would rather cater to his out-of-state, Hezbollah flag-adorned, radical anti-Israel campaign supporters than to his own constituents in Georgia,” a Collins spokesperson said in a statement. “While Jon Ossoff voted to block weapons sales to Israel and refused to condemn the dangerous anti-Israel protests that erupted across our country after October 7, Mike Collins has never bowed to the woke mob and has always put America’s and Israel’s safety first.”

Collins has seemingly taken steps to distance himself from some elements of his record that have troubled members of the Jewish community. The staffer responsible

for the antisemitic X post, as well as the chief of staff who was in the group chat with white nationalists, are both no longer employed by him, according to Collins’ office.

Politico reported last week that his office had brought on a new chief of staff.

Meanwhile, a group of more than 115 leaders and members of Georgia’s Jewish community recently signed a joint statement, first shared with JI, condemning Collins’ social media activity and arguing that “Georgians deserve better.”

“Like most groups, Jews have a wide array of perspectives on issues. Yet our Jewish tradition binds us in a belief that we should all be practicing *tikkun olam* — working to make the world a better place,” the statement reads. “Our Jewish values also prohibit hate speech and racism — noting that all humanity is created in the image of the divine. Mike Collins’ posts run counter to our uniting principles, and we should not tolerate it, especially in a candidate for US Senate.”

Some Jewish voters in the state said they have no concerns about voting for Collins, seeing ousting Ossoff as crucial and expressing confidence that Collins’ evangelical Christian background will make him a reliable supporter of Israel and the Jewish community.

Korman, the GOP committeeman, said his concerns about Ossoff stretch back further than his votes on the arms sales to Israel, criticizing the senator for failing to speak out in favor of state-level legislation condemning the Oct. 7 attacks and codifying the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism.

He alleged that despite his Jewish identity, Ossoff has failed to speak out or be a leader for the Jewish community amid rising antisemitism nationally and within the Democratic Party.

Asked about Collins’ own vote against the Antisemitism Awareness Act in 2024, which would have codified the IHRA definition’s use by the Department of Education, Korman said that he understood that Collins’ concerns focused on free speech issues.

Others are building new relationships

with Collins after the primary. Kirk Halpern, an Atlanta Jewish business leader, said he wasn't familiar with Collins before the race but reached out to Collins' campaign to offer his help as soon as the Republican primary ended, due to his deep opposition to Ossoff.

He said that after Ossoff's first vote to block arms sales to Israel, he committed that "as soon as a Republican opponent is [nominated] that I will do everything I can to support that candidate. ... Jon Ossoff has been wrong on every key vote."

Halpern said that Ossoff, being Jewish and speaking out and voting against Israel, "gives cover for those that are antisemitic" and who want to see Israel destroyed.

Pressed on concerns from other community members about Collins' history, Halpern said that he has found, living in the American South, "that the strongest support for Israel ... as well as the vitality of the American Jewish community comes from the evangelical Christian community, the sincerity and love that evangelical Christians have for Israel and the Jewish people is very deep."

Collins, he continued, is a member of that community. "I believe that his evangelical Christian faith and his love of Israel and of the Jewish people will make sure that going forward, mistakes don't occur," Halpern said.

"I also believe that the absence of leadership by Jon Ossoff and with Jon Ossoff being Jewish, that is so much more problematic for our community," Halpern added.

Halpern is set to host a meet-and-greet for Collins with members of the Jewish community later this month and said he hears similar "tremendous, informed disappointment in Jon Ossoff" from Jewish friends on both sides of the aisle.

For some Jewish voters, Derek Dooley, the moderate Republican primary candidate backed by Gov. Brian Kemp, was their favored candidate, but Collins handily won a primary runoff last month. Radow, the Democratic donor, said that Dooley would have been a more compelling Republican option for him as well.

Emanuel Fialkow, an early backer of Dooley's campaign, said he's now fully

behind Collins.

"He's our only chance to get rid of Ossoff, who we feel is untrustworthy and ineffective," Fialkow said. "It should not be that difficult to support our only ally in the Middle East, and to symbolically weaken them with a vote against funding for arms sales is ridiculous. It's almost un-American."

Fialkow said he believes that Collins has, "whether it be for political reasons or his own religious convictions, demonstrated unwavering support for our strongest ally [Israel]."

He said he also has no concerns about Collins' record on antisemitism, and said Collins has been "unwavering in his support in every conversation" that he's heard about with Atlanta's Jewish community.

One Jewish leader in the state said that Kemp, who has strong connections to the Jewish community, could have made a stronger play for the Jewish vote had he run for the seat. The leader said Collins — given both the concerns about his record and his comparative lack of relationships with the community — will have a tougher time picking up those votes. Whether Kemp decides to push his network to support Collins could also be a factor.

Ossoff, despite his votes on Israel, maintains a loyal and dedicated base among Georgia's Jewish community — particularly in the face of a candidate with Collins' record. His supporters argue that the backlash to his votes on Israel has been overblown.

Mike Greenwald, a member of Atlanta's Jewish community who organized the statement of local leaders and community members, said he was "fairly horrified" at Collins' nomination and that it was easy to find other Jewish Georgians who agreed. "He does not seem to be a friend of our community," Greenwald told JI.

In addition to his social media activity and former chief of staff, Greenwald also raised concerns about Collins' attendance at a New York City Young Republicans Club event alongside a member of Germany's far-right AfD party.

He called Ossoff "an incredible friend to Israel," emphasizing other votes the senator has taken in support of Israel and his work

on hostage issues. He said Ossoff has been a champion on antisemitism, pointing to his support for federal nonprofit security grants for the community and other engagement with the Jewish community.

"He does all of the things you would expect someone who is a champion for both Israel and the Georgia Jewish community to do, and it's not surprising, because it's genuine, and we're very proud of him for that," Greenwald said. He said many in Georgia's Jewish community are particularly proud of Ossoff as the state's first Jewish senator.

"The contrast, as you picture him continuing on as senator versus Mike Collins, is pretty stark and an easy call for us," Greenwald said.

Levow, the Ossoff fundraiser, said, "There's no real comparison here, if he's a little uncomfortable with 2,000-pound bombs [being sold to Israel], versus someone who's flirting with antisemitism and white nationalists,"

"[Ossoff] has a very, very deep well of Jewish support," he continued. "I haven't really wavered from him. I don't find any of his votes problematic, to be honest with you. I think history will look kindly on them, and they're going to be evidently reasonable."

He said that he sees the Jewish community, particularly younger Jews in the community, as highly supportive of Ossoff, noting that one recent Jewish community fundraiser drew around 70 supporters and raised \$70,000. He said Ossoff has made frequent appearances at community events, including a speech at the area's largest synagogue around Hanukkah.

"I think he's done an excellent job for the Jewish community, for the state of Georgia, for the country," Larry Auerbach, another Ossoff supporter, told JI, while raising concerns about Collins' affiliations.

"Even if I didn't appreciate and support Ossoff as much as I do, Collins is just somebody I could never tolerate for those reasons," Auerbach said.

Auerbach called objections to Ossoff's votes against arms sales to Israel "much ado about very little," arguing that blocking the sales in question would have done nothing

to hurt Israel's operations in Gaza. He also highlighted Ossoff's support for nonprofit security grants.

Ultimately, a Jewish leader in the state said, Ossoff is likely to pick up a substantial majority of the Jewish vote in the state — in part because most of the community generally votes Democratic.

"There will be those who vote for Collins 100% because of his support for Israel and are willing to be less concerned about the adjacent antisemitism," the leader said. In the end, the leader continued, "Jon will probably get 70-65% of the vote — the Jewish community might increase its voting for Collins a little bit more," but most voters will likely fall along party lines.

As the election nears, Radow, the

Democratic donor, is waiting to see how things unfold.

"We'll see how the race plays out, we'll see how they debate, we'll see what they say on the issues," Radow said. "I think the Jewish community will have to make a choice. There are die-hard Democrats who'll vote for a Democrat à la [New York City Mayor Zohran] Mamdani, just because he has a D in front of his name. I'm not that Democrat."

Radow, who had previously engaged with Ossoff and pressed him to change his votes on weapons sales, suggested he had essentially written off Ossoff on the issue. He said Ossoff has dodged calls and outreach in the weeks ahead of major Israel votes, and then sent out mass emails to

those concerned by his positions "a week after" the votes. "I'm just not going to play that game with him," Radow said.

But his conflicted feelings about the pivotal race remain. He said that Collins being the GOP nominee "goes a long way to ensure that Jon's going to win."

Radow said Collins had once told him he believed the 2020 election was rigged, which was a "non-starter" for Radow, on top of Collins "surrounding himself with people that are not of moral character and I've heard ... he's said some antisemitic things along the way. For all those reasons, he's not a compelling candidate for me." ♦

JULY 15, 2026

Board of Peace officials lobby Capitol Hill for peacekeeping funds

Three senior officials with the board are requesting \$200 million from Congress to support the International Stabilization Force in Gaza

By Gabby Deutch

Three senior U.S. officials connected to the Board of Peace, the Trump-led body created to resolve the conflict in Gaza, have been meeting with congressional offices this week to request \$200 million for a peacekeeping force, according to two people with knowledge of the meetings. The meetings mark the first time that Board of Peace representatives have approached Congress with a funding request.

Jasper Jeffers, an American military officer serving as commander of the International Stabilization Force, the United Nations-mandated peacekeeping force created in last year's ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas; Board of Peace senior advisor Josh Gruenbaum; and retired Gen. Mark Schwartz, a former U.S. security coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority who is now the Board of Peace's security lead, spoke at the Capitol Hill meetings.

The ISF, which was part of President

Donald Trump's 20-point peace plan announced last September, has struggled to find backers. Indonesia, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Kosovo and Albania pledged troops to the effort, but most have not yet done so. Indonesia paused its plans in March during the Iran war. What was billed as a 20,000-troop force has fewer than 20 initial members, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report this week. The ISF's goal is to demilitarize Gaza and keep Hamas out of power, and countries have voiced concerns over whether their troops would be required to militarily confront Hamas.

Gruenbaum, Jeffers and Schwartz have met or plan to meet with staff from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the national security-focused subcommittees on the House and Senate Appropriations committees. A Board of Peace official called the meetings "extensive and highly constructive."

"The delegation shared the progress that

the Board has made in recent weeks, including movement toward the establishment of a humanitarian pilot [program] in Gaza, ongoing efforts in negotiations to disarm Hamas, preparations for the Palestinian technocratic government to assume authority, the huge improvement in the humanitarian situation, the pending start of training for a civilian police and the recent and ongoing scale-up in manpower and logistics for the International Stabilization Force," the official told *Jewish Insider*.

The requested \$200 million for peacekeeping operations, or PKO — a specific category in the Foreign Assistance Act — is primarily intended to fund the International Stabilization Force, according to a source with knowledge of the Board of Peace's activities.

The request is for discretionary funding, rather than a direct congressional appropriation for the Board of Peace. The

Board of Peace source said conversations about congressional appropriations for the body may come later.

The Board of Peace official said the congressional meetings marked “the start

of an extensive effort to work with Congress” in order to “transform Gaza into a place of peace, prosperity, economic development and reconstruction.”

Earlier in the week, Board of Peace

officials met in Brussels with senior Palestinian Authority leaders, and the European Union committed to providing \$1 billion toward Gaza recovery efforts. ♦

JULY 14, 2026

In his final term as WJC president, Ronald Lauder looks for the next generation to step up

In a wide ranging interview, the longtime Jewish leader and philanthropist stressed the need for Jewish education and major investment in public relations for Israel and discussed his hopes for a successor

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

NEW YORK — Nearly every surface in Ronald Lauder’s office on the 42nd floor of the General Motors Building in Midtown Manhattan has a clock on it. Some are brass, some are gold, and there’s a large wooden one with a shining pendulum hanging on the wall.

And all of them were ticking away as he spoke with *eJewishPhilanthropy* about his past, the Jewish community’s troubling present and his hopes for its future, while sitting on his distressed leather furniture, looking out over the southeast corner of Central Park, in one of his first extended interviews in years.

The clocks, of course, are also a metaphor. Lauder, 82, announced earlier this year that he will not seek reelection when his term as president of the World Jewish Congress ends in 2029, and his mind is occupied with both finding a specific successor for that role and, more broadly, encouraging the next generation of Jewish leaders to step up, particularly in Jewish education.

He was also explicit that this is the reason why he agreed to be interviewed.

“I believe very strongly that we must have young philanthropy. I would say that 80% of philanthropy today is from people over 60,” he told *eJP*.

“When I was in my 40s doing this, everyone thought I was crazy. Well, they

were right, but the fact is... a future is embedded in this young generation coming up. Because if they don’t feel the same spirit that we felt in the 50s and 60s and 70s about Israel and the Jewish world...” he trailed off, shrugging his shoulders.

“The thing I need most from you is to say to the people in their 30s and 40s, you have to, *have to* put money into schools. That’s your future. These people have billions of dollars, and they’re doing *bubkes*,” he said, using the Yiddish for nothing. “[They have to do] whatever they can do for educating the kids. Because we’re losing a whole generation of kids.”

A worthy successor

With a penchant for European languages, a career in diplomacy, deep ties to American and Israeli politicians — including President Donald Trump — and decades of direct support for Jewish education initiatives around the world, he is one of a handful of people who can credibly be referred to as one of the Jewish community’s elder statesmen. In addition to the clocks, the tables in Lauder’s office are covered with photographs of him shaking hands and embracing American and Israeli leaders. Outside his office is shelf upon shelf crammed with mementos and gifts from the communities where WJC and his eponymous foundation operate — a shofar from the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, a “Remembrance

Award” from Yad Vashem.

Indeed, as we spoke, just after the now-collapsing American-Iranian ceasefire went into effect, our conversation was briefly interrupted by a phone call in which the first names of two senior figures connected to Trump’s were mentioned. (He also got a call from his wife, Jo Carole, during our conversation — just checking in.) And throughout the conversation, Lauder peppered in references to meals shared with top European leaders and conversations that he had with them, in Flemish and German.

Regarding the now-stalled memorandum of understanding between the U.S. and Iran, Lauder — a critic of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal — remains skeptical about a diplomatic agreement with the Islamic Republic.

In true diplomatic fashion, Lauder refrained from publicly commenting on the emerging agreement during our meeting and afterward sent a carefully worded statement:

“For nearly half a century, the Islamic Republic of Iran has brought instability, violence, and suffering to people across the Middle East and around the world. Its leaders have funded and directed terrorist organizations, targeted Jewish communities far beyond the region, and pursued the destruction of the State of Israel. From the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires

to attacks against Jewish targets in Europe and beyond, Iran's fingerprints and those of its proxies can be found on some of the most devastating acts of antisemitic terror in modern history," he said in his statement.

"The threat it continues to pose, even with new leadership, extends far beyond its borders," the statement continued. "The international community must remain clear-eyed about the nature of the regime. A ceasefire does not erase decades of aggression and nuclear ambition, nor does it change the ideology that has driven Iran's support for terrorism and regional destabilization. Now is not the time to ease vigilance. The United States and its allies must maintain pressure on Iran, hold it accountable, and remain committed to preventing new threats to global security and the world's only Jewish state."

Sitting in his office, Lauder said that his high-level ties and his deep familiarity with international politics — from internal Jewish communal disputes to shifting Middle East dynamics — have made it difficult for him to find someone willing and able to take on the mantle of World Jewish Congress president, as many of the candidates he would want to see in the role feel unprepared to assume the position.

Lauder, who has served as WJC president for nearly 20 years, recalled one potential successor telling him, "But I can't be you." I said, "I wasn't me before I did this job."

Of course, as a democratic institution, Lauder cannot simply select his successor; the next WJC president will need to first garner broad support from the myriad world Jewish leaders who make up the congress and will vote for the next president in 2029. And yet the support of the sitting president, who has served in the role since 2007, would carry significant weight.

Lauder preferred not to state on record whom he would like to see succeed him, though the handful of names with whom he is in conversation would come as no great surprise — well-known, vocal Jewish philanthropists with deep ties to the business sector, civil society and international politics. While not exhaustive, everyone on his list was from the United

States.

Those within the WJC orbit note that it is still a bit early for would-be-candidates to begin jockeying for Lauder's role.

Lauder the peacemaker

Perhaps one of the most confounding things about Lauder is his vocal, unequivocal support for the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a stance that he not only publicly avows but also personally works to keep alive. Lauder regularly meets with Middle Eastern and Palestinian leaders about the topic, and he actively supports Marwan Barghouti, a Palestinian political leader who has been imprisoned by Israel since 2002 for his role in deadly terror attacks carried out by Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, believing him to be the type of figure who could unite and lead the Palestinian people.

This full-throated support for a two-state solution not only sets Lauder apart from right-wing figures in Israel and in the Diaspora Jewish community, but even from most of Israel's left-wing politicians, who have all but stopped mentioning the concept as support for it has reached a nadir in Israel. Though the two-state solution is still endorsed by most American Jews, even most mainstream Diaspora Jewish groups have scaled back their support for it in recent years, in light of its current lack of viability.

Though he maintains deep ties to the Trump administration and to Israeli political figures, Lauder said that when he is meeting with leaders in the Middle East — in Egypt, Syria and Qatar, among others — he is not doing so on behalf of anyone or acting under anyone's orders. He said that he has partners who are "part of different groups," but would not discuss it further for fear of jeopardizing their efforts.

"If you weren't a reporter, we could have a great conversation," he joked.

Lauder was once a close ally of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, supporting him in Israel's 1996 national elections and then acting on his behalf in a failed bid to make peace between Israel and Syria in 1998 under then-Syrian leader Hafez Assad. But in recent years, the two have split, in part due to Lauder's support

for the two-state solution as Netanyahu and his governments have opposed the concept, moved away from liberal democratic positions and embraced extremism.

"The vast majority of Jews, both in Israel and throughout the diaspora, reject this form of extremism. They understand that such positions distract from Israel's legitimate security concerns and move the conversation away from pragmatic, peaceful solutions," Lauder wrote in an opinion piece in the *Arab News* last year in response to comments against the two-state solution by Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. "This is not the vision that Theodor Herzl or the founders of Israel had for the state — a vision rooted in safety, democracy and moral purpose for all its citizens."

As Israel prepares for a new round of elections, Lauder is not planning to endorse a particular candidate. Though he would not say publicly who he was supporting, Lauder said that he would be involved in the elections and that there were two candidates he was watching closely, believing that, between the two of them, there is a workable vision for a two-state solution and a viable path forward for a democratic, Jewish Israel.

PR disaster relief

While his continued, vocal support for a two-state solution sets him apart, Lauder is firmly in the mainstream in his diagnosis of Israel's main challenge: public relations.

"Israel cannot survive alone now. It has to be part of the world. And unless [the Israelis] wake up to public relations, they're going to be more and more isolated. And they don't get it," he said. "It's a disaster, and they're allowing our enemies to define us."

Last month, Lauder called for a \$1 billion philanthropic investment in public relations, saying the field is currently dominated by unnamed Middle Eastern countries.

"We spend no money on [Jewish] education and even less money on public relations," Lauder said. "[Jews] invented public relations, and there's no one doing it. [Jewish philanthropists] are not giving money to organizations that do PR. Most PR things are now paid for by Middle

Eastern countries.”

As an example of the type of work he would want to see, Lauder said that there should be an academic initiative to support Israel’s public relations efforts run through the Reichman University’s Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, the creation of which his foundation supported.

Were the university to launch such a program, Lauder said, “I would help.”

Lauder’s awakening

There’s a certain narrative about Lauder that can be found in many of the articles that have been written about him over the years, that he was a non-practicing Jew who suddenly became interested in Jewish communal work while serving as U.S. ambassador to Austria in the late 1980s. And to a certain extent, this description is true, but it also belies his family’s long-standing religious ties.

In his own telling of his religious history, Lauder recalled the moment when, as ambassador to Austria, he decided to boycott the inauguration of its newly elected president, Kurt Waldheim, a former intelligence officer in Nazi Germany’s Wehrmacht.

“This was the start of my Judaism,” Lauder told eJP.

And yet Lauder also noted that his grandparents were Orthodox and that his family celebrated Shabbat on Friday nights. He also recalled visiting Israel for the first time as deputy assistant secretary of defense for European and NATO policy under then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in the first Ronald Reagan administration, which he described as a transformational experience.

“I used to laugh at people who would get off the plane [in Israel] and kiss the ground,” Lauder said.

“That’s what I felt like doing. I was with a group, with the secretary of defense, Colin Powell [who was Weinberger’s military assistant], myself and maybe five other people,” he said. “We went to see all the military installations, into some place that foreigners usually don’t go to. And the more I saw [of Israel], the more I fell in love.”

And yet despite this draw to Israel years prior, Lauder said that it was his

experiences in Austria that awakened his connection to world Jewry.

A short while after boycotting Waldheim’s inauguration, he visited a kindergarten that had been set up for the children of Soviet Jews who had opted to remain in Austria, which at the time functioned as a stopover point for those fleeing the Soviet Union. “About a third went to Israel. A third went to the U.S. But a third stayed because they didn’t want to go to Israel, and they couldn’t go to the U.S.,” he said. “So this was a kindergarten made for them.”

“They caught my heart,” he said. “The next day, I made a decision: I’m going to build a school. I started buying the apartments in the building next door, and... we had a Jewish school in Vienna.”

A short while later, he started receiving requests to build a Jewish school in Hungary. “Over a period of 20-30 years, I opened 30 schools in all of Eastern Europe. [Some of] these were in communities that people thought had no Jews left,” he said.

“They became quite huge. I came back to the United States, and I tried to get people interested and they gave me nothing. As a matter of fact, worse than nothing, they were saying, ‘You can’t do this yourself. You’re not part of any organization,’” he said. “What they were saying is that they couldn’t deduct it. So I said, basically, thank you very much, I’m going to do it myself. And fast forward today, we have graduated probably 50,000 kids, from the most Orthodox to the most liberal.”

All told, Lauder said, he has likely spent roughly \$750 million to establish and operate these schools over the years, as well as Jewish camps and elder-care facilities.

In addition to looking to the future for the next generation of Jewish leaders, Lauder said he also wants to prepare those schools for a future without him and his support. “I spent all my money on education. And we’re still looking at new schools. But... I want these schools to be self-sufficient,” he said.

“I’m saying to them, ‘Look, when I first started, no one had money, so I paid the money,’” he said. “But your schools now have parents who are wealthy. So we’re gonna cut down the money we’re giving

you. I want you to get used to having parents give you money because I don’t want you to get so caught up that someday, when I’m not here, you’re gonna be in trouble.”

Education is key

Lauder, who launched an initiative in 2024 to boost non-Orthodox Jewish day schools in North America, recognizes that the playbook he used in Europe will not work as well in the United States. The schools he was opening across the European continent in the 1990s were competing against far inferior ones being run by the state. Even non-Jewish parents were clamoring to send their children to the Jewish schools, he noted. This is not the case in the U.S., where public schools and non-Jewish private schools are comparatively far better, and Jewish day schools have hefty tuitions and are also few in number, making it logistically difficult for many Jewish children to attend.

Still, Lauder believes that a strong Jewish education is the key to developing a strong Jewish identity.

In the United States, Lauder recommends building more schools, creating “a very good scholarship program” to make them more financially viable and using a powerful tool to encourage parents to send their kids to Jewish day school: “Shame them into it,” he said, and make it an expectation for all Jewish families.

He credits his Jewish schools with preventing the kind of rise in antisemitism in Eastern Europe that has been seen in Western Europe as it gave Jewish children a sense of pride. “When they saw someone come after them, instead of running away or getting scared, they would take out their yarmulkes and put them on, and they had such power,” he said. “And I learned a valuable lesson: the importance of Jewish education.”

A glance at the many tick-tocking clocks in his office showed that the 30-minute interview we had scheduled had gone on for an hour and a half, and it was time to wrap up. Though there are numerous high-quality photographs of Lauder available, as a former photographer, I asked to take a portrait of the man behind his desk.

He stood before a wall of books, nearly all of them biographies and histories about statecraft and his other passion, art history,

flanked by an Israeli and American flag, with a portrait of that Zionist leader,

Theodor Herzl, staring down at him. ♦

JULY 15, 2026

The Israeli scientist at the center of Trump's search for answers on UFOs

Harvard professor Avi Loeb believes his research, which propelled him to the White House, could usher in a 'new messianic era'

By Gabby Deutch

President Donald Trump has a border czar, a government official leading the crackdown on undocumented immigrants — whom the White House calls “illegal aliens” — crossing the southern border. The president, who likes to go big, now also has a UFO czar, a Harvard astrophysicist who is scanning the cosmos in search of aliens of the science-fiction variety.

It's a stunning if improbable career highlight for Avi Loeb, the grandson of a Holocaust survivor who fled Nazi Germany and settled in a *moshav*, a cooperative agricultural community, in central Israel. As a child, Loeb had a lot of time alone with his thoughts — walking around to collect eggs from the chickens, or driving a tractor to the surrounding hills, where he would sit and read philosophy books.

“I was deeply interested in the most fundamental questions of our existence,” Loeb told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Loeb still studies life's big questions, but from a different perspective. A series of small but ultimately life-changing pivots led him to study astronomy instead of philosophy, setting him on the path toward becoming one of America's best known, and most controversial, scientists.

He now has a new benefactor supporting his quest to discover whether intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe: Trump, who tapped him in June to lead the White House's new effort on the issue.

“That's why I'm doing astrophysics, because I was offered things that I couldn't decline, but at the end of the process it's like

an arranged marriage, and I realized that I'm married to my true love,” Loeb said. “Because in astrophysics we can ask fundamental questions about the universe, which was pretty much what I was aiming to do in philosophy. But I can address it with the scientific method.”

Decades before Loeb would be tapped to lead the Trump administration's unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) science advisory council — an updated scientific term for what are colloquially known as unidentified flying objects, or UFOs — he got his start in the Israeli military.

Loeb served in the Israel Defense Forces' elite *Talpiot* unit, where he pursued a doctorate in astrophysics in order to advance Israel's scientific research and development needs. After earning his doctorate at Hebrew University, a project he pursued in the 1980s through his military service led him on a trip to Washington, where he met someone who helped him get a job at Princeton. A position at Harvard opened up a few years later. He has been there for 34 years.

At Harvard, Loeb was granted tenure after just three years and spent more than two decades researching major cosmological questions, seeking to understand the formation of the universe and early stars and galaxies. He was named to a *Time* magazine list of the 25 most influential people in space in 2012. Loeb chaired Harvard's astronomy department for nine years.

The last decade of Loeb's career has been less straightforward. His public

appearances skyrocketed, even as other astronomers sought to keep him closer to earth. In 2017, an interstellar object — meaning an object that was believed to have come from another solar system — was captured on astronomers' telescopes for the first time. It had an unusual shape and exhibited motion unlike asteroids or comets. No one seemed able to explain what the object was or where it had come from.

One year later, Loeb and a Harvard colleague argued in a scientific journal that the object was “humanity's first contact with an artifact of extraterrestrial intelligence.”

Loeb believed the interstellar object was likely an alien craft, a UFO of the science-fiction variety. Except he argued that it was real — or, at least, it *could* be. The argument he has honed over the past decade, which has now launched him into the president's orbit, is that astronomers have a duty to explore the possibility that extraterrestrial life might exist, and that scientists should not preemptively shut down the debate. Many other astronomers say he's tilting at windmills, pursuing a quixotic quest for answers when no evidence exists for his attention-grabbing claims.

“I get attacked from both sides, from people who are skeptics who say we don't want to look at the data, because there is nothing there. They ridicule the actual dealing with the anomalies that the government talks about,” said Loeb. “Then you have people on the other side who say, ‘We already know the answer, he's wasting his time, and how dare he even consider

other possibilities other than we are being visited by aliens.”

After decades of silence from the federal government on extraterrestrial matters, Congress held a hearing on UAP in 2022. It came after the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a report that found that UAP posed a risk to national security.

At the hearing, lawmakers explored whether the unidentified objects were drones or weapons from adversaries like Russia or China; whether they were the result of American pilots observing other American technology they did not know about; whether the UAP were really just glitches on radar or camera screens; and, lastly, whether the UAP were extraterrestrial in nature. Scientists have not seen any evidence of aliens.

Whether life exists outside of earth has long been one of the most energizing and heretofore unanswerable questions facing scientists. It has spurred movies and TV shows and books and Reddit rabbit holes. And it has captured Trump’s attention. Earlier this year, he directed the government to release files related to the

unexplained objects that have been spotted by military craft.

Loeb thinks that the advisory body he now leads, composed mostly of his Harvard colleagues, stands the best chance of definitively identifying the UAP once and for all. He sees two options: either the group determines that the UAP are a national security threat, which would further American interests — or the body finds that UAP are evidence of an alien civilization. Loeb is not modest about the stakes.

“Altogether I think the partnership between science and government is a blessing. It will bring us to a better place: either improve national security in this context of UAP, or reveal the most important discovery ever made,” he told JI. “This may be a naive expectation, but it could bring cooperation among all humans on earth, and in that sense it will reflect the new messianic era of more peace on earth, but the messiah will not arrive from earth. It will arrive from another star.”

Loeb’s dramatic claims may put him at odds with many of his peers in academia. But he says their immediate skepticism toward his conclusions is “not in tune” with

the interests of the public, which he sees as just one area of many where he believes academia is failing the American people. He has also been frustrated to see Harvard tilt towards “a particular political direction,” which he thinks is a mistake. And after the Oct. 7, 2023, terror attacks in Israel, Loeb watched the university “allow protests to disrupt scholarship,” some of which were antisemitic in nature.

“Definitely something is wrong within academia,” said Loeb.

Despite his frustrations, Loeb remains at Harvard. He publishes fewer academic papers now, and focuses more on blog posts on Medium, but his research has not slowed down. He oversees the Galileo Project, which searches for evidence of extraterrestrial technology. His work has made its way to the highest reaches of the American government.

Next month, he’ll face his biggest audience yet: a Major League Baseball game. He’ll be throwing out the ceremonial first pitch at a Houston Astros game in Space City, U.S.A. ♦

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Marcus Foundation invests \$27 million in Hillel International professional development

The gift is one of several that the grantmaker has given for the campus group’s leadership, beginning with \$38 million in 2016

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Student leaders gathered together at Hillel International Israel Summit held in March at the University of Pennsylvania

In a bid to bolster Hillel International’s professional and student leaders at a fraught moment on college campuses, the Marcus Foundation announced a three-year, \$27 million investment, the organization exclusively told *eJewishPhilanthropy* on Thursday. It is the

third in a series of large gifts made by the foundation over the past decade aimed at improving employee retention at Hillel, which supports nearly 200,000 students on 850 campuses.

“Bernie recognized a long time ago that we needed to support campus life because it was going to be and is very difficult today,” Jay Kaiman, the president and director of the Marcus Foundation, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, referring to the foundation’s founder, Home Depot co-founder Bernie Marcus. “He was talking

about it way before it became what the realities are today, so this is a continuation of him looking at the landscape, making a decision that Hillel played a key role in that landscape and we needed to do everything we could to make these [Hillel] buildings come to life and be strong for the students and also to give them a safe haven.”

The grant comes as Hillel has come under scrutiny from both sides of the political spectrum, and as Jewish students are flocking to colleges in the South and Southwest that are considered friendlier

environments than campuses in the Northeast and West Coast, where antisemitism and anti-Zionism is sharper-edged.

In 2008, the Marcus Foundation donated \$3 million to build The Marcus Hillel Center at Emory University in Atlanta. After that, Kaiman said, the organization made “a very intentional decision not to fund infrastructure and buildings, but to fund people.”

One of Marcus’ main passions was for investing in the folks in the “orange aprons” — the associates working the floor at Home Depot stores.

In 2016, the foundation gifted Hillel International with a five-year, \$38 million grant for talent development, followed by a 2021 five-year, \$38 million grant to continue the work. This latest investment continues what is a “transformational relationship with the foundation,” Adam Lehman, president and CEO of Hillel International, told eJP.

When the foundation made the first gift, its leaders had the belief that Hillel International’s “turnover rate was not acceptable,” Kaiman said. At the time, the organization’s annual employee retention rate was 50%. “Even though we built buildings, buildings aren’t worth anything if you don’t have good people in those buildings.”

The original grant led to the creation of a new role focused on supporting talent at individual chapters and of numerous initiatives, including Hillel U, the organization’s yearlong training program, a yearly New Professionals Institute and talent grants that support Hillels financially

to attract top talent, especially in places that may “not even be in a particularly desirable geographic location,” Lehman said.

In the first five years after the initiatives launched, Hillel’s annual employee retention rate soared to 90%. In 2016, leadership hiring from the internal pipeline was 30%. Today it’s 75%.

The greater retention level is occurring at a time when Hillel is growing substantially, but also after years of heightened antisemitism. A 2025 American Jewish Committee report showed that more students were experiencing antisemitism on campus than ever before. In the past year, students and Hillel staff have been harassed and had their property vandalized. Meanwhile, over the past decade, the number of students engaging with Hillel programs doubled from 93,000 to 192,000.

Because of this antisemitism, Jewish students are choosing different schools from a decade ago. Between 2023 and 2025, the number of Jewish students at Harvard, Columbia, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania decreased by 3-5%. According to the AJC report, for 80% of parents, antisemitism was a deciding factor in choosing where their children study.

“Jewish students and their families are voting with their feet in terms of seeking out new environments, and so this grant will enable us to develop professionally staffed Hillels in schools like Clemson [in South Carolina], Auburn [in Alabama] and James Madison University [in Virginia], so that Jewish students who are choosing to attend these schools, primarily in the Southeast and Southwest, can have

amazing Jewish experiences,” Lehman said.

The new Marcus Foundation grant will nurture 78,000 new leaders who support students so they can walk their campuses with Jewish pride, even amidst antisemitism, Lehman said. “We’re going to use this grant to supercharge our student leadership development programs, so that we can catalyze the largest ever new generation of Jewish builders, creators and leaders, using the funds from this grant to invest in new student fellowships, new student convenings, including our first-ever 1,000-plus student leadership convening taking place in February of [2027].”

It brings Kaiman joy to invest in Marcus’ passions. Their friendship spanned three decades, until Marcus died in November 2024. “He worked very hard for his money and we get the honor to direct it to things that were important to him,” he said.

This gift comes at a time when Hillel has come under fire for leaning too progressive for some in the Jewish community and for being too conservative for others.

Kaiman said he hopes that the grant sends the message that “Hillel is important to the Jewish ecosystem, and that our support for them represents our trust in them. Number two, our hope is that this reinforces to the professional teams at Hillel that they’re important to the Jewish community, and we don’t take them for granted...Three, we actually hope that some of these people that we’re investing in not only stay at Hillel but go on and work in other aspects of the Jewish community, because I think Hillel is a great pipeline for other organizations.” ♦