

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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SEPTEMBER 23, 2026

'Life and death': Survivors of antisemitic attacks lobby Congress for security aid

'Everybody, no matter where you fall, should get behind' the Right to Worship Act, said Temple Israel attack survivor Cassi Cohen, calling it a 'no-brainer'

By Marc Rod

A group of survivors of antisemitic attacks across the nation is visiting Capitol Hill on Wednesday to lobby in favor of legislation aimed at protecting Jewish community institutions from future attacks.

"I want to use my story and my voice and show firsthand how federal funding that we did receive through grants actually made the difference between life and death," Cassi Cohen, the director of strategic development at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Mich., told *Jewish Insider* ahead of the meetings. "I'm living proof of that right now, because of the security measures we were able to put in place. I want every member of Congress to hear that loud and clear, and hopefully use that as a platform to create change and safer environments for our Jewish institutions."

Temple Israel was the site of a car-ramming and shooting terror attack in March, targeting the congregation and its attached preschool. Cohen was present for that attack.

The group, organized by the Anti-Defamation League, also included JoJo Drake Kalin, who helped organize the

American Jewish Committee event at the Capital Jewish Museum where two Israeli Embassy staffers were murdered in May 2025, and Ed Victor, who was part of the Israeli hostage awareness march in Boulder, Colo. that was firebombed shortly after.

The group's lobbying agenda included the Jewish American Security Act, which aims to supplement federal security grants among other measures; the Right to Worship Act, which would establish a "buffer zone" around religious institutions during services; and the Pray Safe Act, which would assist institutions in accessing security grants and other security resources.

The group is set to meet with the offices of Sens. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Raphael Warnock (D-GA) and Chris Coons (D-DE) and Reps. Tim Walberg (R-MI), Lisa McClain (R-MI), Nicholas Langworthy (R-NY), Jeff Hurd (R-CO), Claudia Tenney (R-NY), Mike Levin (D-CA), Andrew Garbarino (R-NY) and Bill Huizenga (R-MI).

Cohen explained that Temple Israel had received federal security funding two years ago through the Nonprofit Security Grant

Program, which allowed the synagogue to install a security camera system.

She said that system allowed the security staff to immediately identify where on the large Temple Israel campus the attacker had rammed a truck into the building and respond to the site within seconds, "and that made a world of difference."

Temple Israel, which has had to undergo extensive reconstruction and renovations, was able to reopen its sanctuary and preschool for the High Holy Days, which Cohen said was an emotional experience for her and others in the community.

"We were displaced for nothing that we did, and to be able to spend the holiest days of the year together as a community really showed our resilience, our strength and our resolve to ensure that this won't stop us, and we are stronger," she said. "And it really was the healing moment that I think our community needed in order to take that next step forward."

But the synagogue has also needed to install new enhanced security measures to ensure safe access to the campus.

Kalin said that she's trying to turn her "pain into purpose," adding that that

mission feels especially urgent when she is expecting her first child. She also emphasized that she and the other advocates are visiting the Hill to speak on behalf of those like Sarah Milgrim and Yaron Lischinsky, who died in the D.C. attack, and Karen Diamond, who died in the Boulder attack, who cannot speak for themselves.

"If that can happen in the nation's capital, in ostensibly one of the safest places in the shadow of the FBI offices, it can happen anywhere," she said. "Had there been more funding for the museum that would have allowed for increased security, they could have had someone canvassing the building, [where] the perpetrator was lurking. I'm here today to just talk about how much of a difference that funding and access to that funding makes."

Victor said that the firebombing attack "changed me" and provided "propulsion" to try to find ways to use his experience to help others, including advocating for security for Jewish communities. He said he also felt a degree of "survivor's guilt" after the attack because he wasn't personally hurt, as his friends were.

He praised the responses of everyone who was present at the attack, both Jewish and non-Jewish: "Nobody ran away, everyone ran in to help." One man, a doctor and former IDF soldier, used his own body to help put out the fire, laying on Diamond.

Victor noted that he had served on the security committee for his local synagogue several years ago and at the time didn't fully appreciate the need for all of the levels of security under discussion.

"I'll say my — and I think many in the Jewish community — mindset has shifted. It's now not just nice to have, but a requirement, sadly to say," Victor said.

Lauren Wolman, ADL's senior director of government relations and strategy, said that the legislation on the group's agenda constitutes "tangible steps that Congress can take ... that will make Jewish communities safer — but also many vulnerable communities safer — in this moment."

Cohen, Kalin and Victor all said that the

attacks have had a mix of impacts on their communities. Some people have leaned into Jewish life in defiance and their bonds have grown stronger, but others have been afraid to engage and stepped back from the community.

"The thing that I'm most concerned about is the people who don't show up, the people who were there that step back, and you don't know who they are. I'll call them the missing people, and I feel very sad about that because I know that people step back, and I don't know what it takes for them to come back into that community," Victor said.

Kalin said that some of those at the site of the Capital Jewish Museum attack are leaning into solidarity and Jewish communal life, but others have been afraid to attend Jewish events — even High Holy Day services — since then.

"That's then isolating people from their community," she said. "There shouldn't have to be a calculus of, 'Will I be safe if I go ... and observe my culture, my identity and be with my community?'"

Kalin said that, as a convert to Judaism, seeing the level of security needed at synagogues as compared to churches can be difficult to "fathom." She said that she was nervous visiting Adas Israel, D.C.'s largest Conservative synagogue, for the first time after the attack, and noted that the synagogue had a sharpshooter on the roof for security.

She said she also continues to carry trauma from the attack, questioning her safety, wrestling with her choice to join the Jewish people and questioning whether her unborn child will be safe at a Jewish preschool.

"I keep saying 'unfathomable,' but I think that's the apt word here," she said. "Those are questions that we have to sit in and wrestle in, and that you never thought you would have to."

Cohen noted that the attacks cause fear but also bring the Jewish community together across the country.

"There's of course fear. ... It makes you question whether or not you're safe going to conceivably what should be the safest

place. ... It also really brings a community together," she said. "The outpouring of support — forget just in our local area, but within the first 24 hours, national support, people from all over the country. Because any Jew, no matter where you are, identifies with this."

She said that it's unfortunate that these attacks keep happening, but that they are having the opposite of the intended effect, bringing the Jewish community together and strengthening its resolve.

Kalin and Cohen visited the Hill earlier this year for similar advocacy meetings under the auspices of the ADL. Kalin said that, returning to the Hill, she is getting more comfortable sharing and explaining her story to lawmakers.

She added that it's powerful for lawmakers to be able to hear individual stories and put faces to the data that the ADL gathers on nationwide antisemitic attacks. "This isn't just a number from a survey," she said.

The Right to Worship Act is new since the last time they visited Capitol Hill, and Cohen argued that it's a "no-brainer."

"You should be able to go to your house of worship and not have to worry about someone harassing you as you're going there. So everybody, no matter where you fall, should get behind that," she said. "I really hope people just look at it as plain and simple as that, and get behind it."

"This is part of our mission as well, that we have to be leaders in this and help create change," Cohen added. Temple Israel has also welcomed various political leaders to the synagogue campus. "We want them to see firsthand. I think there's something powerful in being able to witness what the destruction was and what the attack looked like," she added.

She said she sees both her trauma and the work as a lifelong mission for herself and her children.

"This is now part of our responsibility forever," she said. "It's a club we don't want to be part of, but we are now, and we're going to do everything we can to utilize that to make change." ♦

Cruz warns Christian leaders are 'asleep' on antisemitism among youth

Accepting Chabad's Lamplighter award, the Texas senator warned that pastors don't see the drift on the right

By Emily Jacobs

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) warned on Wednesday that Christian leaders are “asleep” and failing to recognize the degree to which antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment have spread among Christian youth.

The Texas senator made the comments while accepting the leadership award at the American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad) annual Lamplighter Awards in Washington. Cruz voiced concern that older Christian leaders, specifically evangelicals, were not acknowledging that younger adherents have ideologically drifted from previous generations. “If you look at the polling, young evangelicals are turning systematically against Israel, and there are millions of dollars that are being spent to turn them against Israel,” he said.

“There has been no community in America that is more passionately pro-Israel than evangelical Christians in America, but all is not well,” Cruz said. “I think the Christian Church is asleep. I think a great many Christian pastors are asleep. I’ve spoken with a lot of pastors, particularly older pastors who are 60 or 70 or 80, and I get that that doesn’t sound all that old, but they say to me, ‘Ted, what are you talking about? I don’t see antisemitism on the right.’ If you’re not online, you’re sitting there serenely unaware of what has happened.”

Cruz argued that this shift marks an “existential” crisis because it could cause Americans “to wake up in five years and find ourselves in a country where both major parties are unambiguously anti-Israel and unapologetically antisemitic.”

“If we do not fight back, if we do not wake up leaders of the Christian Church to take on these lies ... if we don’t stop this now, that’s where this could lead,” he said. “This cancer does not end, and I will tell

you it is penetrating especially among young people, among teenagers, and 20-somethings on the right. Somewhere between a third and a half are listening to this poison. The only answer to lies is truth. We’ve got to engage. We’ve got to fight it.”

Cruz was honored at the Chabad gala alongside Jeff Miller, a leading Republican lobbyist and the board chair of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.

Miller, who also serves on the Republican Jewish Coalition’s board, called for “a new strategy for a new kind of threat” facing the Jewish people while describing how antisemitism has surged in the digital age.

“The world’s oldest hatred has returned with new slogans, new accusations, and new platforms. It is the same ancient manipulation — delivered, amplified, and weaponized in new ways,” Miller said. “The delivery system is social media. These platforms are engineered to maximize engagement. Controversy drives engagement. Antisemitism drives controversy, and so the platforms amplify it. Antisemitism, it turns out, unfortunately, is good content. Hate used to need a mob to spread. Now it only needs an iPhone.”

“In the past, antisemitism often rose within societies during times of trouble. Today, foreign adversaries are deliberately injecting it into our society and weaponizing it against America to weaken us, confuse us and divide us, and it is working,” he continued. “We need a new strategy for a new kind of threat — one that protects free speech while exposing manipulation, demanding transparency, and confronting the foreign actors who are deliberately using antisemitism to divide our country.”

Miller urged Jewish Americans of all political stripes to look past partisan

disagreements and come together, “because the scourge of antisemitism is not a Republican fight or a Democrat fight.”

“This is not a partisan fight, nor should it ever become one. We may disagree about politics, but tonight, in this room and in this fight, we must be one,” Miller said. “Whether antisemitism comes from Hasan Piker or Tucker Carlson, we must call it for what it is. Anyone who condemns antisemitism from the other side while excusing it from their own is not fighting hatred. They are exploiting it.”

Miller also called on Jewish leaders and organizations to join forces on their efforts to combat antisemitism, arguing that more unity was needed to effectively respond to the problem.

“This room is filled with people who fund and power the fight against antisemitism every day. That commitment matters, but we must also confront an uncomfortable truth: We have hundreds of organizations fighting the same enemy — and too often, we are fighting separately,” Miller said. “Antisemitism is coming at us with a baseball bat. We cannot continue fighting back with a thousand toothpicks.”

“We do not need less commitment, we need greater coordination. We do not need fewer voices, we need those voices speaking together,” he continued. “Antisemitism does not care which organization gets the credit. Neither can we. We need one strategy. One coalition. One united front.”

Miller was introduced on stage by Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and through video addresses from President Donald Trump and former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Schwarzenegger credited Miller with helping propel his 2006 campaign to victory and with fundraising “for project after project” once in office, adding that

“what makes Jeff special is that he doesn’t just show up when it is easy or when someone is watching. He’s always determined. He’s determined to help the Jewish community.”

The event was co-chaired by former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA); Eli Miller, a Republican operative in the private equity space; and Norm Brownstein, a veteran Washington lobbyist and a

founding member and chairman of Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck LLP.

Among those in attendance were Will Scharf, who took over as White House counsel this month; acting Labor Secretary Keith Sonderling; Jacob Reses, Vice President JD Vance’s outgoing chief of staff; Mark Isakowitz, chief of staff to Sen. Dave McCormick (R-PA); White House Jewish liaison Martin Marks; *Punchbowl News* founder Jake Sherman; Jonathan Burkan, a

member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council; and Real Estate Roundtable President and CEO Jeff DeBoer.

Sens. John Fetterman (D-PA), John Barrasso (R-WY), Bill Hagerty (R-TN) and James Lankford (R-OK) also stopped by, as did Reps. Craig Goldman (R-TX) and John James (R-MI) and former Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-SC). ♦

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Two Seattle Jewish leaders warn of Jewish complacency in face of rising antisemitism

In a new op-ed, local political heavyweights Joe Schocken and Sam Jefferies argue that Seattle is a 'laboratory' for tactics for pushing Jews out of civic life that will spread across the country

By Danielle Cohen-Kanik

Two of Seattle’s top Jewish leaders are sounding the alarm about the costs of ignoring rising antisemitism, offering up their own city as a “canary in the coal mine” — a warning of how Jewish communal apathy can allow individual acts of discrimination to slowly erode Jewish life.

“I’ve been stunned by the effort to erase the Jewish community in so many parts of civic life across the country,” Joe Schocken, one of the authors of a new *eJewishPhilanthropy* op-ed laying out the stark warning, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week. “I’ve been deeply involved in many aspects of the Jewish community, and sadly steeped in Jewish history. That this effort to push the Jewish community out, this effort to scapegoat the Jewish community, has happened so quickly is just stunning to me.”

But even “more stunning to me” he said, “is the comfort and the complacency that I see across the Jewish community. Everyone is busy living their comfortable best life, and I’m just stunned that this subject is absent from almost every conversation I have across the Jewish community.”

Schocken is a retired investment banker and longtime, major Democratic donor and fundraiser who previously served as chair

of AIPAC Northwest. Sam Jefferies, his co-author, founded a pro-Jewish political action committee in Washington state and served as board president of the American Jewish Committee’s Seattle region.

They met about a decade ago, and their work together sharpened after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks into something closer to triage. “We feel this is an urgent moment,” Jefferies told *JI*. “That pressure is mounting by the day. The number of fronts we are fighting on continues to multiply, and we have been making that case privately and directly, over and over — both of us using our own particular brands or gravitas or otherwise to try and force that urgent recognition and action. And it hasn’t been met in the way that we feel is needed. That’s why we felt we needed to put pen to paper.”

In their op-ed, they point to graffiti on the University of Washington campus that read “kill your local colonizer”; to Jews pushed out of a local Asian American history museum’s exhibit on confronting hate together; to the Seattle-native rapper Macklemore declaring “F*ck America, f*ck Israel” from the stage of a Palestine Will Live Forever Festival in the city’s traditional Jewish neighborhood, on Shabbat, long before he made similar comments on Ed

Sheeran’s tour that raised so much controversy in recent weeks.

Speaking to *JI*, they also raised efforts to push Jewish representatives out of local party organizations and from the state Legislature — where two progressive Jewish legislators and several of their Democratic allies are being challenged from the left in the November elections — in what they called “a multi-year effort to exclude Jews from this part of the civic world.”

In the midst of such an effort, Schocken had a moment of clarity reading his weekly newsletter from the local Jewish federation. “It looks to me almost exactly the same as what I read four or five years ago. And I see this real emergency coming across the country, and I just don’t see the wake-up call. I don’t see the recognition among the successful, well-educated people in our community.”

Asked why he thinks complacency exists among the largely well-educated and financially successful local Jewish community, in a city known for its high-tech and aerospace sectors, Schocken pointed to social media and disinformation campaigns. He recalled being asked to meet with a member of the House Intelligence Committee “who said a great deal of this

comes from Russian efforts to destabilize America, and they have recognized that antisemitism is a potent force in doing that.”

“For a tiny people like us, you know, it’s such a small population,” he said. “To withstand this tsunami of hate and one-sided presentation of the news is dispiriting, is disorganizing. And you’re saying, ‘Why is this happening? How do you fight as such a small people? How do you fight all this antisemitism and anti-Israel hate?’ I think many people kind of choose to turn away and leave it to other people. It just seems like such an impossible task.”

The authors lament in the op-ed that candidates with an “anti-Jewish posture” are “march[ing] into power functionally unchallenged” while “Jewish community efforts to oppose them are too little and too late.”

Asked where the legacy organizations are getting it wrong, given both their backgrounds in leadership in these organizations at the local level, Jefferies said, “They each have a cadence of dinners and fundraisers and are competing for donor dollars, but not presenting a vision to meet the moment. And I think that’s true across the board. It’s not one particular organization. There is a demand for leadership that’s not being met.”

Schocken said he believes AIPAC, where he has held top lay leader roles, “is doing a great job,” but these organizations generally “have resources. It is time to pivot, to recognize, to acknowledge to the community how serious this problem is, and put their resources into identifying, mobilizing the community, and doing something about it.”

Many of these organizations are 501(c)(3)s and therefore legally unable to wade into electoral politics, Jefferies acknowledged, but “in some ways they don’t want to touch it because it doesn’t feel good, and I think the time for feeling good is long past. ... You have to be willing to call your political friends that you’re cozy with and lean on them to act, and if they’re not, then to remove them.”

The national organizations, he said, “look to Jewish communities across the country to fund [them], and the money is raised at the local level to go to these national entities, and we don’t then see it come back. If there is any community that is on the front lines and is feeling this — which is why we framed the op-ed the way we did — it is ours. And yet we don’t see that investment.”

Schocken said that, if the situation is not adequately addressed, Seattle Jewish life could soon look like “the U.K. and Canada today,” citing what he called the “very real threat to the safety and future of the community” in those countries.

“I would say Jewish life in Seattle in five years — and then in other parts of the country in seven, eight, nine, 10 years — looks more like Dublin, Ireland,” said Jefferies, who lived in Ireland and studied Irish history and politics, “where a small Jewish population is excluded increasingly from the spaces it needs to be in — whether it’s Herzog Park being renamed, or a need to hide who you are in public, or to hide who you are in professional spaces, arts, certainly political life.”

For Schocken, the broader Democratic Party, where he has spent a lifetime as an activist and donor, is “very lonely” for the Jewish community right now, an issue he

said he’s raised with members of Congress many times.

His ties to the party run to the highest levels: In September 2023, the Schockens hosted a Biden Victory Fund reception at their home on Lake Washington, where Schocken introduced First Lady Jill Biden, and the following March, President Joe Biden appointed Schocken’s wife, Judith, to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. He was also Northwest chairman of John Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign and served on the Democratic National Committee national finance committee.

Asked about the Democratic Party’s trajectory, Schocken said: “Obviously, not going in a good direction. I think we’re going to have to wait to see after the midterms.”

He locates part of the failure in Democrats forgoing what has historically been a cornerstone of the party’s support for the Jewish state. “I don’t see the Democrats explaining the importance of Israel to U.S. national security,” he said. “Protecting the national security of the United States requires Israel, as anybody in the military or intelligence community will explain. And I feel like that message has been missed by the Democratic Party.”

The work to address these issues has to begin locally, Schocken and Jefferies argue. “What is being tested in Seattle will not stay in Seattle,” their op-ed concludes. “It is being readied for your city, your school board, your synagogue, and the only question is whether you will have built something to meet it before the air runs thin.”

“Don’t wait for the singing to stop.” ♦

Expanding community relations work, UJA-Fed. N.Y. promotes Hindy Poupko to executive vice president

Rise of anti-Israel sentiments and politicians, as well as antisemitism, demanded that the federation take a more active role in advocacy and political organizing efforts, Poupko says

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

This evening, thousands of people will gather near the United Nations' headquarters in New York City to demand that world leaders take serious action against antisemitism as Jewish communities continue to face violent attacks — most recently in Canada, where a gunman opened fire at a synagogue on Yom Kippur evening, seriously injuring a police officer stationed outside.

The demonstration — held in partnership with a wide range of local and national Jewish organizations — is the latest such event to be spearheaded by UJA-Federation of New York, as the group, which historically focused on raising and distributing philanthropic funds, deepens its political advocacy and community relations work. As part of that expansion, the organization has promoted the head of those efforts, Hindy Poupko, who will now hold the title of “executive vice president for community strategy and external relations,” and also grow her department.

This increased focus on advocacy and community relations has been developing for over a decade, since both Poupko and outgoing CEO Eric Goldstein joined the federation, but it has also accelerated in the wake of the Oct. 7 terror attacks, the election of New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and the rise of other Democratic Socialists of America-aligned candidates, whose politics — particularly their anti-Israel stances — are at odds with those of the mainstream Jewish community. Speaking to eJP earlier this year, Goldstein said that those elections served as a wake-up call for the federation that it needed to be more civically engaged, particularly on a local level. “We still have significant numbers, significant influence, and we

need to use it more effectively in local government moving forward. And I think that this situation will result in a Jewish community that's stronger, more coordinated, more focused and involved in local civic politics, civic engagement in ways that are only beneficial to the community,” he said.

As one of New York City's largest philanthropies, which funds a broad array of social and educational programs, UJA-Federation of New York has considerable sway in the city. It is also supported by some of the city's wealthiest and most influential Jewish families and maintains regular communication with a large number of local Jews, allowing it to effectively organize them. Bolstering the federation's own political advocacy efforts — on top of those of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York — grants the Jewish community greater ability to participate in official lobbying, which is legally limited based on organization size.

Last week, *eJewishPhilanthropy* spoke with Poupko to discuss her expanded role, representing New York City's politically diverse Jewish community and how the federation is preparing for anti-Israel demonstrations this week.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Judah Ari Gross: *I understand that you have a new title. Tell me how this came about it.*

Hindy Poupko: Yes, executive vice president for community strategy and external relations. This promotion is a reflection of probably a 10-year journey that started, in many ways, when Eric came on board to lead UJA.

I've been here now for 11 years. Eric's been here for 12. And this department that I lead, called Community Organizing and

External Relations, didn't exist before a few years ago. And over the course of my tenure here and Eric's tenure, I think we built a new muscle. We are far more in-community than we ever used to be.

We launched a community organizing unit that never existed here before, where we have local professionals working across our catchment area to ensure that we are attuned to the very hyper-local needs of the Jewish communities in our catchment area.

And also because, Judah, there were things happening in Jewish life where we felt like actually we were the best positioned to do the work. Right? Historically, and it's still true today, that UJA's base has been and still is: When something needs to be done in the world, let's find the right Jewish nonprofit to do it. And alongside that, as the world changed, it became increasingly clear that there was a body of work that we at UJA needed to lead ourselves. And increasingly, with the challenges facing our community, our initial instincts and Eric's initial instincts about that was that UJA needed to do more itself, that we needed to be more connected to local communities, we needed to be more involved in government relations and public policy, that we needed to do more to respond to growing antisemitism.

All of these things that are now so obvious to us, 10 years ago were actually instincts that we needed to do more, that this would be a growing area of work. And in many ways, this department and, sure, my promotion, but more the elevation of the department and its work, is a culmination of the building of a muscle, a new muscle over 10 years, at a moment when I think it is needed more than ever.

JAG: *A lot of the community relations and advocacy work that you mentioned has historically been the purview of JCRC-NY,*

with which UJA-Federation of New York works very closely — as you well know, having previously worked there. So why is this something that the federation needed to take on itself as opposed to financially supporting and boosting there?

HP: JCRC is an indispensable partner. And honestly, Judah, we've never worked more closely together. Not a day goes by that we aren't on the phone with each other. We are both needed.

What separates us from all Jewish organizations in New York, I would say, is our role in this city as a major funder of social services. And what that means, Judah, is that UJA is considered part of sort of the civic and social service fabric of New York City. Which means that we are often the only Jews in lots of rooms, right? So we sit alongside many secular philanthropies. We sit alongside secular health and human service providers. We work with city agencies, around city and state contracts for our agencies. So we play a very unique role in this city. And because of that, that also comes, I believe, with it, a sense of responsibility.

We know that when we speak, people hear us. And they also know that our concerns are broad. They know that we care deeply about this city, and not just our own Jewish community, but the future of this city. And because we know that people hear us when we speak, that also means that we have more of a responsibility to use our voice when we need to, to use it judiciously and responsibly, but to use it.

JAG: *Besides your new title, what does this expansion look like? New hires? New departments?*

HP: Over the past two years, we've doubled the size of our government relations team — and we're still filling some of those new roles as of a couple months ago. Three years ago, I think to this day, we brought on Daniel Rosenthal, who was an New York state Assembly member, to expand the scope and scale of our government relations team.

By the way, I'm a lobbyist, Daniel's a lobbyist, and our CEO is always a registered lobbyist, so we all do lobbying in some form. Traditionally, our government relations portfolio was primarily

advocating for funding for social service agencies, funding for Holocaust survivors, it was primarily around our historic social service agenda. That continues to be true. And we also needed over the past few years a more robust Jewish communal policy agenda, right? So work around funding for Jewish security, right? Our work to advance and successfully make into law the buffer bill to better protect synagogues and other Jewish institutions from menacing protests. So our government relations team now continues to uphold that historic social service agenda, but is also keenly aware of our capacity to advance legislation that protects the Jewish community in a time of increased antisemitism. We will continue to use that muscle.

The other new role that we just hired for is a full-time civic engagement director. Our Jewish community is now keenly aware of the importance of local politics and local elections. Over the past couple of years, we have invested over a million dollars in get-out-the-vote efforts in local Jewish communities. This past June, we made a whole campaign called "June is the new November," aimed at increasing Jewish participation in primaries, which is where the majority of these elections are decided in New York, given that we're a blue state. We are now pushing and investing resources into ensuring that our Jewish communities are engaged in year-round civic engagement, not just episodic around elections. So that requires more resources. That means we want every 11th grader in a Jewish school to pre-register to vote, because you can do that when you're 16. We want Jewish institutions to be engaged in year-round voter registration work and voter education work. We want every synagogue to have relationships not just with their police precinct, but with their local elected officials. We want communal leaders coming with us to City Hall and to Albany — and they are.

Last year, we asked people to come with us to Albany to advocate for the buffer bill. It used to be nobody would answer those emails. Nobody wanted to come to Albany with us. [This year,] the mission sold out in 24 hours. And we had a host of rabbis and interfaith leaders in the halls of government

for the first time, testifying in Albany about the importance of this specific piece of legislation, and they want to do more.

So this year, every eight weeks, we're going to bring our communal leadership together and actually educate them. Here are the bills that are important to us. Here are the bills that we're nervous about. Here are the elections coming up in your neighborhood. We are going to be far more... I don't want to say in your face, but far more "in it" with local communities around key policy issues that they need to be well versed on and active on and around key elections where they really need to show up and vote.

JAG: *What other kind of advocacy work is the federation taking on? Are there other ways that this is not just redundant with the work of the JCRC?*

HP: A few months after Oct. 7, [2023,], elected officials in New York said to us, "We hear from you all the time, but we don't hear from your community. And the other side is in our face all the time." They would tell us how they would go to the grocery store in November 2023, and people would be yelling in their face, "Ceasefire! Ceasefire!" and they said we need to hear from you more. So we had to figure out how to do that, but also uphold the norms of our community. We still want to be polite citizens. We don't want to be bullying our elected officials, but how do we ensure that they're hearing from us? And that's when we launched something called UJA Action.

If you're part of UJA Action, you'll get an email that says something like, "Your city council member just went to Israel. Click here to thank them." Or, "Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal is going to be faced with whether or not to vote on the buffer bill. Click here to send her a personal email, you're her constituent." So through this new program called UJA Action, we got thousands of individual emails from actual constituents — and they're all written in a customizable way. It's not just New Yorkers yelling at a summit, but actual constituents of local elected officials [sending emails] around issues of concern. We do it on the city level, we do it on the state level. And this was a new attempt on our part to lift up

the voice of the Jewish community around these issues of public concern.

Regarding the JCRC dynamic, this is an all-hands-on-deck moment. So right now, we, together with the JCRC, are training our JCC leaders in how to do community relations and how to do civic engagement. No longer can our community get away with outsourcing these functions to one or two organizations. Everybody needs to be doing this work and doing this work well.

JAG: *What is the total number of people in your department now?*

HP: Twenty-four.

JAG: *And what had it been?*

HP: So there are three “verticals” underneath my department.

There’s the community organizing department. Those are the community organizers I told you about, where we have professionals who live and work in Queens, Brooklyn, Westchester, Long Island to ensure that we are connected to the local needs there and also doing work in those communities, specifically around civic engagement and bridge building. That whole department is about six years old.

We have our government relations team, which has doubled in size over the past year and a half.

And we have our antisemitism response. And those are two new professionals in that vertical. And that houses the totality of our grant-making response to antisemitism — from security, to education in the K-12 spaces, to work now in arts and culture to ensure that Jewish narratives are not being shut out of critical cultural conversations, in the publishing conversation, all of that.

And as you can imagine, there’s a lot of interplay between those three. So when government relations has a public policy priority, the community organizing unit comes into play to ensure that they’re mobilizing lobbying missions from those communities, ensuring that people are showing up, pushing out our calls to action through UJA Action. So there’s a very nice one-two punch between our government relations team and our community organizing unit that is really embedded in community.

JAG: *This is not necessarily unique to New York City, but as the city with the largest*

Jewish population in the world, New York is particularly ideologically diverse. How do you navigate that? A not insignificant minority of the Jewish community voted for Mamdani, supports Mamdani. Even those coming out against the buffer bill are not just a handful of fringe weirdos — they are certainly not the mainstream of the Jewish community, but they are also not a disconnected from it entirely. How can the federation speak for or be representative of the wider Jewish community when the Jewish community is so divided today?

HP: I’m going to quote some statistics. We studied the Jewish vote for Mamdani very much. And over 80% of the Jews who voted for Mamdani want to see a two-state solution to the conflict. In other words, they uphold Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, and they’d like to see the conflict resolved in that kind of way. Which is another way of saying that 80% of the Jews who voted for him actually don’t share his vision for the Middle East. That’s very important to know.

And in study after study, we continue to see that the vast majority of New York Jews support Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state. UJA, as you know, does not take particular policy positions on the moves of the Israeli government. But we very much view it as our role to support Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, which remains a consensus issue among Jewish New Yorkers.

And I would say that we represent Jewish communities that want to be represented by us, right? We know that the Jewish community is far from a monolith. I think our grant-making represents the idiosyncratic nature of our Jewish community. It’s incredible diversity. There is no city that has more offerings for a young Jew today than New York. If you want a high-end Shabbat downtown, or you want a musical experience on the Upper East Side, or you want to go to Chabad, there’s all of that.

So I would say on the big stuff, Judah, there remains a consensus.

JAG: *But there are those issues where there isn’t necessarily consensus. For example, there is less division over the federal income tax credit on donations to scholarship*

organizations because it is not designed to come at the expense of school budgets, but more broadly the issue of government funding for Jewish day schools is something that parts of the Jewish community strongly supports and other parts are staunchly opposed. How does the federation handle those issues?

HP: We are encouraging the governor to opt into the tax credit.

But I would say that there were certain issues that used to be big issues that are not really big issues any more. Yes day school funding, no day school funding — that used to be a big issue. It’s not an active fissure in the Jewish community.

[In general,] it is our job to have our ear to the ground. So not only do we conduct annual studies to understand where our Jewish community is. But our lay leadership tables are designed to be representative of the Jewish community. Before we take public policy positions, we reach out. We talk to local stakeholders. I get on the phone with key rabbis in our community, school leaders, JCC leaders. Probably in a given week, I speak to 30 Jews in positions of communal authority from partner organizations: ADL, AJC, Conference of Presidents, New York Board of Rabbis, obviously the JCRC. And over the course of the past few years, most of the time, there is a strong emergent consensus around the issues where you’ve seen us speak out.

I honestly can’t think of, Judah, a time when we did something and got a lot of pushback from that group. Particularly since Oct. 7, I would say. There’s even more consensus around these issues.

And while it may be more of an art than a science, I think we are quite good at intuiting, in a given moment, what does our Jewish community want from us right now? What do they want us to be doing? What do they want us to be saying?

JAG: *You said that the expansion of the federation’s community relations work has been going on for more than a decade. Can you take me through that process? Was this something that the professional side was pushing for or was this an area that lay leaders wanted to see? Where did this push come from?*

HP: So I'm truncating nearly 10 years of history, which will always mean a little bit of an oversimplification, but I think there was a general sense — on the part of professional and lay leadership — that the city was changing. Before the 2018 Tree of Life shooting, we had a task force on the rise of hate crimes in New York. Pre-Tree of Life, we were already thinking about what the right security apparatus was for our community. And then right after Tree of Life, we were poised to design and launch the Community Security Initiative, which is now, I think, the best security program in the country for a Jewish community. So there was a general sense that antisemitism was increasing, that the demographics of New York were changing, and that UJA needed to evolve alongside those changes.

[Former UJA-Federation of New York Executive Vice President] John Ruskay has an old adage: We were there on Sept. 11 because we were there on Sept. 10. That is, in many ways, how I feel about this moment that we were building toward in

the history of the New York Jewish community. We are now poised to ensure that our community meets this moment.

When I was at JCRC, we were asking elected officials to take popular positions. We had waiting lists for our trips to Israel. There were waiting lists for people who wanted to speak at our pro-Israel rallies. Now we are asking our elected officials, in many instances, to take positions that are unpopular with their constituents. This is a whole new reality for us. And when you're in that position, when you're asking elected officials to take a stance that is morally correct, justified, but unpopular, you need to be stronger. You need to be louder. You need to be more out there. And that's what you're seeing from us.

You're seeing a much more robust, I would say effective, and louder Jewish community. And I believe it is our role to enable that voice and make it stronger and louder and ensure that it's being heard in the halls of government.

JAG: *In terms of Israeli Prime Minister*

Benjamin Netanyahu's upcoming speech at the United Nations General Assembly and planned demonstrations against him, what efforts has the federation made to ensure the safety of the Jewish community?

HP: We have the rally on the 23rd, which is an attempt to ensure that our narrative doesn't get drowned out during this U.N. week.

[Regarding anti-Israel demonstrations,] we work very closely with the New York Police Department, and we have every confidence that they will handle the protests carefully and responsibly as they always do.

We do anticipate that there will be anti-Israel protests on the 24th [when Netanyahu is scheduled to address the UNGA], and we have every confidence that our police department will handle them carefully and responsibly, while upholding people's First Amendment rights to be out there. ♦

SEPTEMBER 23, 2026

Saudi Arabia's Houthi crisis is partly of its own making, analysts say

Riyadh squandered a yearslong lull and fractured the anti-Houthi coalition with its UAE split, experts tell JI — and its new defense partners are hanging back

By Matthew Shea

Saudi Arabia is facing an escalating Houthi offensive along the Red Sea coast and direct attacks on its own territory, in what regional analysts describe as a turning point in Riyadh's conflict with the Iran-backed terror group — and a crisis they say was created in part by Riyadh's own miscalculations.

The Houthis recently gained major ground along the Red Sea, including the port city of Mokha and around the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and escalated their attacks over the weekend by directly striking Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport.

Regional analysts told *Jewish Insider* that Saudi Arabia's current position stems

in part from its failure to strategically prepare during a yearslong pause in fighting. Experts say that Riyadh's rift with the United Arab Emirates has also weakened the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen, making the challenge more daunting.

Current hostilities follow years of relative calm between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis that Riyadh worked deliberately to maintain. A U.N.-negotiated truce took effect in April 2022 and was extended twice in 60-day increments before formally expiring that October.

After its expiration, "instead of a formal U.N. truce, we had a backchannel between

the Houthis and Saudi Arabia that kind of settled the conflict into a de facto truce," said Allison Minor, director of the Atlantic Council's Project for Middle East Integration. "Those conversations between the Saudis and the Houthis — there were discussions about what the future of Yemen would look like, the future of Saudi Arabia's relationship with Yemen, and something certainly kept the Houthis from restarting the fight up until just recently."

Underpinning that quiet was a broader diplomatic framework aimed at ending the Yemeni civil war, a conflict Saudi Arabia had been involved in for nearly 12 years.

"There was an international consensus

around the need to wind down Yemen's war through an agreement that included the Houthis," April Longley Alley, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. That roadmap, she said, "would have included significant financial advantages for the Houthis in return for a ceasefire and for them being part of a political process."

Riyadh kept that offer available even after the U.S. first designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization in 2021 — a designation revoked by the Biden administration and reinstated last year — and after the group began attacking Red Sea shipping in late 2023.

"The Saudis worked hard to keep the Yemen front quiet," Alley said. "They kept communicating with the Houthis. They kept this potential for a deal very much on the table, but what we saw was just the limits of that approach."

Riyadh's tactic carried a risk that analysts say was well understood at the time: The Houthis have historically treated pauses in fighting as opportunities to strengthen themselves, including during the 2022 truce, Alley said.

Minor said Saudi officials were not naive about the group and had understood that another confrontation was likely, a conclusion she said they reached after the Houthis launched a campaign against Red Sea shipping that the group cast as solidarity with the Palestinians following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attacks. The problem, she said, was what Riyadh did with the intervening time.

"I think that the criticism here is that the Saudis did not do as much as they could have to be prepared for that confrontation with the Houthis once it came," she said.

Jonathan Schanzer, executive director at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, similarly argued that Riyadh missed an opportunity in the pause in fighting. He noted that an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, brokered by China in the spring of 2023, also provided Riyadh with time it didn't take advantage of.

"The Saudis agreed to stop delegitimizing the Iranians in their media, including [the outlet] Iran International, and the Iranians agreed to restrain the

Houthis. That was the arrangement that held, until it didn't hold," Schanzer said. "There is a legitimate question to ask about whether the Saudis exploited that time appropriately — whether they took advantage of that hiatus in fighting. I think the answer is no. I think they did not manage this time properly, and for that reason the Saudis have themselves to blame in part."

The clearest evidence of that gap is the current state of the Yemeni forces. After a rift with the United Arab Emirates — which began developing in 2019 over differing visions for Yemen's political future — recently ruptured, Saudi Arabia moved to consolidate its influence over the Yemeni government and merge its fragmented armed factions under a single command — an effort that was never completed, Minor said.

Attempting to finish that work now, she said, "while an active war is going on, when they've already lost significant territory on the west coast, is not going to be easy."

Alley said Riyadh's efforts to build deterrence on the ground, conducted in parallel with its diplomatic outreach, failed their first serious test. The Saudis, she said, were "building up the government of Yemen and trying to regroup and coordinate this very factious anti-Houthi coalition after they had in some ways pushed the UAE out."

"They were trying to kind of have some deterrence on the ground," Alley said. "But what we saw was that it wasn't effective in defending Mokha and the Red Sea coast. The Houthis just were more militarily dominant on the ground."

"I don't see how you can have Yemeni forces on the ground really effectively confronting the Houthis and holding off further Houthi territorial gains if you don't at least have Emirati acquiescence," Allison Minor, director of the Atlantic Council's Project for Middle East Integration, said. "Obviously, Saudi-Emirati tensions remain quite high, but as the Saudis are going to Egypt, to Turkey, to Pakistan, to the U.S., U.K., I really just feel like Abu Dhabi has to be part of that."

The split with Abu Dhabi weakened the

anti-Houthi coalition at a moment when Saudi Arabia needed it most, Alley said. "The Houthis are one command, one mission, and this other side has a tendency to fight each other."

Minor said the damage from that rift is still visible in the current fighting. Expectations among Yemenis that government forces would perform better without Emirati involvement "does not seem to have been the case," she said. The units hit hardest in the Houthi advance on the west coast were those of Tareq Saleh, long backed by the UAE, while forces tied to the Southern Transitional Council have stayed out of the fight.

Meanwhile, Riyadh has been unable to rely on its own partners for help. Despite having signed a mutual defense agreement with Turkey and Pakistan last month, neither has thus far come to Saudi Arabia's aid. Pakistani officials have said publicly that Saudi Arabia has not activated the pact or specifically requested help inside Yemen.

Analysts said they were skeptical that the pact would hold significant weight even before the current fighting began.

"I was always pretty skeptical that the Mecca agreement would look like NATO Article V in the way that we tend to think about it," Minor said. "It's simply not the same. It's not rooted in superpowers with the capabilities to actually provide a nuclear umbrella."

Minor said the absence of a superpower guarantor is the defining limitation. Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons, she noted, but its officials "have been hesitant about the idea of extending that nuclear umbrella."

"The Mecca Pact is, in my view, at least right now, a pact that was born of desperation in the face of Houthi and Iranian attacks on the kingdom," Jonathan Schanzer, executive director at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said. "The notion of Turkey and/or Pakistan intervening on the Saudis' behalf does not sound likely to me."

"Simply the lack of a superpower also means that these are essentially middle powers who have much more nuance in

their foreign relations and tend to be much more wary of getting involved in armed conflicts, especially outside of their own immediate environs,” she said. “It’s not surprising to me that they haven’t come to Saudi Arabia’s defense.”

The agreement’s real function, Minor said, is likely to be “much more in terms of security cooperation, sharing of technology, arms sales, etcetera, perhaps training and that sort of thing, than it is actively coming to their defense in the way that the U.S. has done for allies and partners in the past.”

Schanzer also noted that the Mecca agreement appeared to be “born out of desperation,” and predicted that Ankara and Islamabad are unlikely to intervene.

“It may end up being a disappointment — there’s not much that they’re going to get out of this that they could take to the bank, so to speak,” Schanzer continued. “I think [Saudi Arabia is] going to find that they are still on their own.”

Alley said the pact appears to function primarily as posturing rather than a true defense mechanism. Still, she said she believes it is “too early” to make a final call on how the alliance will shake out, noting that the region is still at an “inflection point” with its aftermath still to be determined.

Analysts also drew a distinction between defending Saudi territory, which Riyadh’s partners are assisting with, and fighting inside Yemen, which they are not.

“From what I’ve seen, the Pakistanis and the Turks, just like other Saudi allies, are helping with the defense of Saudi territory,” Alley said. “But asking for these countries to help with a war inside of Yemen is just a very different type of ask that would come with pretty significant consequences for a

country like Pakistan, who has a significant Shia population in particular.”

Minor said Riyadh’s broader search for backing has produced little. Saudi Arabia “feels that they need a strong international coalition to counter the Houthis,” she said, both for material support and to avoid the international criticism it drew earlier in the war. “But they haven’t been getting a ton of traction there, at least not yet.”

“It seems to me that the bar for U.S. intervention is still really high,” April Longley Alley, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. “President Trump in particular, from what we’ve seen from the reporting, is still trying very much to keep this bilateral truce with the Houthis and not to explicitly expand the war, particularly the regional war right now.”

The Trump administration, which declared a ceasefire with the Houthis in May 2025, has so far confined its role to intelligence, logistical support and helping defend Saudi territory, while maintaining direct communication with the Houthis. According to *The New York Times*, President Donald Trump had considered carrying out military strikes against the terror group over the weekend, however he abruptly called them off.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, when asked about the Houthi attacks, told Fox News on Tuesday that the United States has a defense agreement with Saudi Arabia and intends to live up to its commitments. But experts said Trump appears “very hesitant” about becoming involved and they do not expect American forces to enter the Yemen war.

“Stepping up support — logistical support, intelligence sharing, help with the

defense of Saudi territory — is something that I would expect to see,” she continued. “Doing more in Yemen, I think, is a really high bar right now. But you never know with this administration.”

Even defense assistance from Israel is “not off the table” for Riyadh, according to Schanzer, who argued that enlisting help from Jerusalem has “got to be in the back of the minds of Saudi decisionmakers right now.” However, he said the issue is whether Turkey and Pakistan would “put up with such an arrangement.”

Furthermore, Schanzer argued that Saudi Arabia’s problem does not stem from a lack of partners, but rather from a lack of genuine commitments.

“When you look right now at the number of partners that the Saudis have enlisted, at least on paper, to be partners or defenders of the kingdom, it’s actually rather lengthy,” he said. “The question really right now is whether the Saudis, with this help, are going to be able to do much to defend against Houthi attacks and to prevent debilitating strikes on key assets inside the kingdom. And on that, I have to say that I have doubts, because I don’t think that any one of these partners are fully committed to the mission at hand.”

Still, he said many countries are afraid to intervene out of a desire not to join the fight, something that has further hindered Riyadh.

“The fear actually comes from these Western countries that if they begin to help, they also may find themselves under attack — and that is a debilitating factor for the Saudis,” Schanzer said. “There’s not a lot of wiggle room here for them. They need more help than they’re getting, and I don’t see anyone stepping up to give it.” ♦

In new book, Zibby Owens weaves memoir with a reckoning of Jewish life after Oct. 7

Owens said she wants her readers to feel like antisemitism 'is happening to a friend' by the time they reach the essays focused on the issue after chapters focused on divorce and motherhood

By Haley Cohen

While Zibby Owens' latest book opens with her intimate and sometimes humorous essays on divorce, motherhood and midlife weight gain, it gradually reveals a broader, weightier theme — the reality of life as a Jew in post-Oct. 7 America.

"I want them to feel outraged," Owens told *Jewish Insider* — the reaction she's hoping for from readers by the time they reach "How It Feels to Be Jewish Right Now," an essay in her new collection that names chants like "From the River to the Sea" as warning signs. Her book has a deliberate sequencing, Owens said: opening with universal chapters before turning to antisemitism, so that "by the time they get to the Jewish piece of it, they already are relating and it feels more personal because they might feel like [antisemitism] is happening to a friend."

"Learning about the numbers of antisemitism [is hard to relate to] when you don't have a specific example. I want [readers] to feel like they know someone this is happening to," said Owens.

In Between Chapters: How I Started Over, Took Some Chances, and Found the Plot, released on Tuesday, the author, publishing entrepreneur and mother of four weaves deeply personal and universal stories with a candid reckoning of what it means to be "publicly Jewish" since Oct. 7 and before — from a conversation with her children about the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018 to her own wedding at Central Synagogue in Manhattan, the site of an antisemitic attack over the summer.

Owens, who turned 50 last month, spoke with JI ahead of the book release about why she chose to combine serious discussions on antisemitism with stories about falling in love with her tennis trainer and lessons from her father, Stephen

Schwarzman, the billionaire co-founder and CEO of Blackstone. She also shared what she hopes non-Jewish readers take away and why she believes more Jews are choosing to speak out rather than lower their voices.

Owens' latest book follows the 2024 release of *On Being Jewish Now: Reflections from Authors and Advocates*, a collection of essays from more than 70 writers and religious leaders that she edited in the aftermath of the Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks. In November 2023, Owens publicly withdrew her sponsorship for the National Book Awards over its "pro-Palestinian agenda."

But before Oct. 7, Owens' public work focused primarily on books, authors and parenting (such as her podcast "Moms Don't Have Time to Read Books"). She describes in *Between Chapters* as never having planned to be "publicly Jewish" before Oct. 7, and says that while she didn't hide being Jewish, "it just wasn't the most salient part" of her personality.

Before Oct. 7, Owens said, her Jewish identity was present but rarely central to her public life. That changed almost overnight. "After Oct. 7, being Jewish became something that eclipsed everything else. It bled into my literary life, not even by choice necessarily," she continued — including, she noted, rising antisemitism in the book publishing world itself.

As a Jewish woman who is the founder and chief executive of her own publishing house, Zibby Publishing, Owens told JI the rising trend of Jewish-owned publishing houses — new ventures that aim to publish Jewish and Israeli stories that mainstream houses won't — is "great."

"I'm eager to read the books that they publish. [Antisemitism in publishing] was particularly intense after Oct. 7. It's [still]

pervasive. Everyday there's something online that makes me worry," she said.

That unease extends beyond the publishing world and into Owens' own sense of safety raising Jewish children in New York City. In an essay written years before Oct. 7, she details telling her twins, then 11, about the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh that took place the day they were headed to a bat mitzvah, and her son asking if something like that could happen in New York.

Looking back on the reassurance she gave her children at the time, Owens said while she "hoped nothing would happen ... having lived through 9/11, I've never felt totally secure in New York."

"Part of my job as a parent is to focus on the things we can control and not make my kids panic," she told JI. "Unfortunately, I feel less and less safe in New York everyday. The question of whether to leave is always on the table, but I really don't want to. Also, it's not just New York, attacks are happening more everywhere."

"Looking back at that essay, I couldn't have imagined how much worse things would get so quickly," she said.

Yet even as many feel their sense of safety erode, "a lot of Jewish people have increased their voices, put megaphones to their voices," in the aftermath of Oct. 7, said Owens.

That shift stands in sharp contrast to a memory Owens returns to in the book: her mother once quieting down when discussing "Jewish things" — and the line she said in response, "There's no reason for us to lower our voices," which became the title of one of the book's essays.

"I think more people than not have come forward as being outwardly Jewish — wearing Jewish stars, all of the external markers of community," Owens told JI.

“Connecting in the community has made it possible to survive this time. Despite all of the threats, Jewish people are being loud and proud, more so than before.”

“I don’t know that we have the luxury of

lowering our voices,” she continued. “This is our instinct as a people. In the Holocaust era, hiding is how people survived. But it’s gotten to a point where to prevent something like that happening again, we

can’t hide. We have to call out this type of behavior when we see it, even if that feels like it has no effect.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

Sunkist Fruit Gems, a colorful staple of synagogue celebrations, discontinued

The kosher confection appears to be the latest victim of private-equity firms acquiring classic candy brands and then shaping them for the mass market

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

After more than a half-century of sweetening Jewish events, the kosher staple Sunkist Fruit Gems has been discontinued as of May, eJewishPhilanthropy has learned.

The neon-colored candy is ubiquitous with Jewish celebrations; nearly every bar and bat mitzvah and *aufruf* in America features the celebrants getting showered in the candy. The omnipresent gems line tables at nonprofit galas, propel candy drives and fill Purim-fundraiser *mishloach manot*.

“They’re an iconic American candy brand,” Jon Prince, the owner of CandyFavorites.com and McKeesport Candy Co., a candy wholesaler established in 1927, told eJP. While many American vendors still have the candy stocked, “we have a very limited amount left,” Prince said. “They’ve gone from being a classic candy to being a collectible.”

The discontinuation is part of a trend in the candy world, Prince said, where private-equity firms acquire classic brands and market them for the masses — in the process often rendering them non-kosher. This same trend has caused other historically kosher candies to lose their *hechsher*.

“Kosher food is a niche,” Prince said. “It’s a niche for a specific audience, and to that audience it’s extremely important, but to a company that is interested in quantity versus quality, it’s not so important.”

Fruit Gems was launched in 1955 by the Los Angeles-based Ben Myerson Candy

Company, which struck a licensing deal with Sunkist — one of the first of its kind in the candy world — in 1966. The company remained a family business until 2006 when it was acquired by Jelly Belly Candy Co. In 2023, Jelly Belly was acquired by The Ferrara Candy Company, the owner of Atomic Fire Ball, Fun Dip, Sweetarts, Nerds, Red Hots, Pixy Stix, Lemonhead and Laffy Taffy. The company discontinued selling Sunkist Fruit Gems on May 1, according to a Ferrara customer service representative.

“Believe it or not, it’s due to lack of consumer demands across the country,” the representative, Fred, who wouldn’t share his last name, told eJP. “If something doesn’t perform, [the company] move[s] onto something else.”

Prince, who is a third-generation owner of McKeesport Candy Co., said that Sunkist Fruit Gems were one of his business’s top sellers — last year he sold well over 1,000 pounds. Over the years, he’s sold mountains of them to synagogues, including for Purim and Sukkot fundraisers. He found out that the gems were discontinued in August, when he tried to order them and was informed by Ferrara that wasn’t an option.

“My dad always joked [that] the day comes when this job will not be as fun when you have nothing to sell,” Prince said. That is becoming a reality as more acquisitions occur in the candy world. Big business looks at the bottom line and slashes brands that aren’t selling across the mass market, he said. Ferrara has discontinued selections of other brands, including Lemonheads, which

once offered Appleheads, Grapeheads and Cherryheads.

Private-equity firms have also been cutting back on the kosher status of many formerly kosher favorites, including Sour Patch Kids and Swedish Fish. When this happens, sellers aren’t often informed until the product is in hand, Prince said. “Ordering kosher candy in today’s day and age is *caveat emptor*, buyer beware.”

McKeesport Candy Co. was one of the first wholesalers to provide candy buffets — spreads of containers of assorted candies and treats — in the aughts. Today, employees need to sift through candy individually to ensure it contains a *hechsher*.

Brands often lose their *hechsher* when the factory that makes them adds brands to their production line that aren’t kosher, the Ferrara customer-service representative said. He recommends that buyers check candy packaging every time they make a purchase and don’t depend on online photos, which are often dated, for proof of kosher certification.

Other brands are likely to be available that can serve as a substitute to the Sunkist Fruit Gems, Prince said, including one produced by candy company Sunsations. “But the Sunkist Fruit Gems as you and I know it — gone.”

There’s also a chance that a discontinued candy can come back, the Ferrara employee said, but it would take a massive demand from across the country.

“You never know,” Fred said, “but that’s not likely.” ♦