

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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Utah Sen. Mike Lee breaks with his party on foreign policy

The conservative Republican is wary of American engagement abroad. Just don't call him an isolationist

By Gabby Deutch

Republican Utah Sen. Mike Lee has a habit of irritating fellow senators when it comes to his “no” votes on broadly popular legislation.

In 2022, he was the only senator who opposed efforts to create a national historic site at a former Japanese internment site in Colorado. And for every year except one since his 2010 election, Lee has voted against the annual defense authorization legislation, passed yearly with a veto-proof bipartisan majority. His criticism of Washington's ongoing financial support for Ukraine since Russia invaded the country last year has also put him at odds with the Republican mainstream.

That obstinance typically doesn't win many friends in Washington. But it gave him a leading role as just one of just five GOP senators to speak at this week's marquee Heritage Foundation conference marking the conservative think tank's 50th anniversary. Heritage has long played an outsized role in shaping Republican policy, but it has lately been distinguishing itself

by staking out foreign policy positions at odds with the hawkish national security establishment.

Lee's Thursday speech at the conference touted the Constitution as his guidepost on foreign and domestic policy, even if many of his foreign policy positions take him out of the conservative mainstream. He has argued that the executive branch has long overstepped its constitutional mandates on foreign policy issues and that Congress has not sufficiently stepped up to its role as the entity that can declare war.

“The No. 1 priority for us was looking at something through the lens of the Constitution, so looking through the enumerated powers, figuring out if something was clearly delegated to the executive versus what was clearly a function of Congress,” said Robby Smith Saunders, a former foreign policy advisor to Lee. A spokesperson for Lee did not respond to a request for comment.

What this amounts to in practice is a skepticism of American engagement in

foreign conflicts and a broad desire to limit American spending abroad. Just don't call him an isolationist, his allies say.

“I think he's definitely a restrainer. But I definitely would not ever characterize him as an isolationist,” said Saunders.

Still, Lee has often found himself on the outside on major foreign policy issues, particularly on Ukraine. “The American people need to speak up on this and make clear that while we're concerned about Putin — and Putin's a bad guy, and I hope sincerely that he's stopped — this cannot be ours to fight, nor can it be ours to fund alone,” he said on Fox News in February, on the first anniversary of Russia's invasion.

This sentiment echoed comments by former President Donald Trump, who has long argued against American support for Ukraine, and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who said in March that getting involved in a “territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia” is not a “vital national interest” for the U.S. DeSantis later attempted to walk back his comments.

The critical responses from many Republicans indicate that among senior lawmakers, support for continued American military and financial assistance for Ukraine remains strong. “Just because someone claims something doesn’t mean it belongs to them. This is an invasion,” Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) said in response to DeSantis’ remarks. Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) called DeSantis’ comments “disturbing.”

While Lee’s foreign-policy worldview may have been relatively uncommon among U.S. senators when he was first elected a dozen years ago, his approach to the world has now gained several powerful ideological allies, Trump chief among them.

“He’s been very consistent since he was first elected. What is different is that it’s no longer just him and Sen. Rand Paul [R-KY]. It’s that there’s more people that are willing to stand alongside him, particularly on the Republican side, and challenge the prevailing status quo around foreign policy,” said Dan Caldwell, vice president at the Center for Renewing America, a conservative think tank closely aligned with Trump.

Trump’s embrace of the “America First” banner was a turning point in moving the Republican line from internationalism to a more isolationist approach. Lee doesn’t hew to all the same positions as Trump; for instance, where Trump embraced Saudi Arabia, Lee routinely criticizes Washington’s close relationship with Riyadh, citing Saudi human rights abuses. (Last year, he was the lone Republican to sign onto a letter with progressive Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) questioning U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, citing their impact on civilian casualties in the war in Yemen.) But Lee’s overlap with the former president on many other issues is clear.

“I think the future of Republican foreign policy will not deviate much from concepts and principles adopted by Trump, but Republicans will pursue them with a bit more finesse and nuance,” said Bilal Saab, the director of the defense and security program at the Middle East Institute and a former senior advisor at the Department of Defense.

In the Senate, Lee has found allies in Sens. Josh Hawley (R-MO) and J.D. Vance

(R-OH), both of whom also spoke at the Heritage summit this week.

“I think [L]ee feels like if we’re going to spend this money, we need a rationale for it, or else we shouldn’t be spending it,” said Victoria Coates, a former advisor to Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), a close friend and ally of Lee’s.

This mentality has put Lee at odds with more traditionally hawkish Republicans, who think it is both morally right and in America’s national interest to get involved in some overseas conflicts.

“The reality is that some investments abroad make Americans safer and more prosperous at home. That reality is not always evident to average Americans busy with their lives. Responsible leaders explain that what America does or does not do abroad matters at home,” said Brad Bowman, senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which represents a more interventionist strain of conservative foreign policy. “As Russia, China, and Iran cozy up with one another, it would be pretty foolish for America to neglect its closest friends and allies. We need them more than ever.”

One notable exception to Lee’s approach to foreign spending is Israel. Unlike Rand Paul, an isolationist with whom Lee frequently partners, Lee has not criticized Washington’s \$3.3 billion in annual security assistance to Israel. The reason may be that Lee views American support for Israel as strategic for the U.S. — whereas security assistance to Ukraine does not necessarily benefit America, in Lee’s worldview.

“I know in some ways, on a certain level, it seems like maybe an exception to his rules,” said Saunders. “I think for him, what’s so important about Israel is the fact that there’s a mutuality of benefit in terms of R&D, technological capabilities, cooperation when it comes to certain missile-defense programs and knowledge, and he’s driven by his faith.”

Lee traveled to Israel in 2018 for the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, along with Cruz and the more hawkish Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC).

“If you had Mike Lee and Lindsey Graham at the same event, you probably have the full spectrum of conservative national security policy,” said Coates. Lee

earned the endorsement of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s political action committee in his 2022 reelection campaign.

The efficacy of the Lee approach, at least in the current Congress, is in question. Neither Congress nor President Joe Biden appears likely to make any major changes to Washington’s aid to Ukraine anytime soon. And while Lee has joined with some progressive Democrats to criticize American support for Saudi Arabia, they are in the minority.

Lee has also been one of the loudest voices seeking an end to the 2002 legislation authorizing the use of military force in Iraq, which he argues has been applied too broadly and for too long. The Senate voted to repeal the 2002 AUMF, and if the House follows, they will hand the Lee camp an ideological victory — but the bill’s future in the House remains uncertain.

Nearly half of Americans (48%) support the U.S. sending weapons to Ukraine, while 29% oppose it, according to an *Associated Press*-NORC poll from February. But Americans are divided on whether the U.S. should directly send government funds to Ukraine. Support for both policies has decreased since last year, when the AP found that 60% of Americans supported sending weapons to Ukraine.

“I think that more of the country is probably now in alignment with [Lee’s] position on issues than even when I worked for him five years ago,” noted Saunders. ♦

Mark Robinson's run for N.C. governor to test GOP in battleground state

Jewish community in a bind over how to respond to a powerful, and popular, figure with a long record of antisemitic comments

By Matthew Kassel

For the second time in his brief political tenure, Mark Robinson, the polarizing lieutenant governor of North Carolina, stands poised to test the limits of acceptability as he seeks higher office in a key battleground state.

The 54-year-old Republican formally announced on Saturday that he is running for governor, setting up what is expected to be a fiercely contested race for the state's top job. "The establishment is scared because I can't be controlled," he told a large crowd of supporters at a speedway in Alamance County, near his hometown of Greensboro.

He launched his campaign with an extensive and well-documented history of antisemitic comments and derogatory remarks targeting Muslims and transgender people, among other groups. The lieutenant governor, who first took office in 2021, has refused to apologize for his rhetoric, which has raised questions over his broader appeal to voters in the general election.

But while several GOP prospects failed to overcome electability issues in high-profile gubernatorial and Senate contests last cycle — including in swing states like Arizona and Pennsylvania — Robinson's candidacy will demonstrate whether he is an exception to that trend. His campaign will also be a test for North Carolina's overwhelmingly Democratic Jewish community, members of which are now privately weighing how to respond to an increasingly powerful figure who enters the race as a clear Republican frontrunner.

"There's a lot of concern about it," one Jewish leader told *Jewish Insider* recently, speaking anonymously to discuss a sensitive topic. "We really think he could get elected."

Even as Robinson's past statements have drawn condemnation from Jewish

leaders and other activists in North Carolina and beyond, early polling suggests that the controversial conservative lawmaker, who would be North Carolina's first Black governor, remains popular among a majority of Republican primary voters in the Tar Heel State.

"Any candidate who gets out of either party's primary has a chance to win the governor's mansion in North Carolina, even someone with extreme, polarizing rhetoric like Mark Robinson," Chris Cooper, a professor of political science at Western Carolina University, said in an email to *JL*.

A spokesperson for Robinson did not respond to a request for comment.

The lieutenant governor will face at least one opponent in the GOP primary. Dale Folwell, the state treasurer of North Carolina, announced his campaign in late March. Former Rep. Mark Walker (R-NC), who ran for an open Senate seat last cycle, is also reportedly planning to launch a bid next month. The primary winner would almost certainly go up against Josh Stein, North Carolina's attorney general, in next year's general election.

In a campaign launch video released in mid-January, Stein, a moderate Jewish Democrat who is closely aligned with Roy Cooper, the term-limited governor, indicated that he expects to face Robinson even at this early stage, accusing him of sparking "division," igniting "hate" and fanning "the flames of bigotry."

Still, though some might expect Robinson's "extreme rhetoric" to "spur Democratic turnout," said Cooper, the political scientist, he warned that "the 2022 election cycle featured lackluster turnout for Democrats, especially in Democratic strongholds like Mecklenburg County,"

which includes Charlotte, home to the state's largest Jewish population.

"For Stein to beat Robinson, he'll have to do more than just shine a light on Robinson's extreme statements," Cooper added. "He'll have to motivate his base. And that's a challenge that has proven difficult for statewide Democrats not named Roy Cooper."

Robinson, for his part, has defied the odds before, notwithstanding his clear flaws as a candidate. The former factory worker from Greensboro emerged from relative obscurity just five years ago, when a fiery speech on gun rights that he had delivered on the floor of a city council meeting went viral, propelling him into politics.

Following an invitation to speak at the National Rifle Association's annual leadership forum in 2018, Robinson, a devout Christian who built a large social media audience while railing against abortion and the evils of socialism, announced his candidacy in North Carolina's open-seat race for lieutenant governor. He prevailed over eight Republican primary rivals and won the general election with 52% of the vote.

His victory, which shocked the political establishment, was troubling to some Jewish leaders in North Carolina, who expressed alarm over Robinson's history of offensive comments, many of which had been publicized before voters went to the polls.

In the years leading up to his election, Robinson amplified a litany of antisemitic tropes on social media as well as in an interview in which he agreed with a fringe pastor who had claimed that among the four horsemen of the apocalypse was the Rothschild family of "international

bankers.”

Elsewhere, Robinson decried a “globalist” conspiracy to “destroy” former President Donald Trump and disparaged “Black Panther,” the Marvel film whose titular protagonist, Robinson wrote, was “created by an agnostic Jew” and a “satanic marxist.” The movie, he alleged, referring to Israeli currency and using a Yiddish racial slur, “was only created to pull the shekels out of your Schvartze pockets.”

Even more comments from Robinson’s past, recently unearthed in an investigation published by *Talking Points Memo*, have since emerged, including a social media post verging on what appears to be Holocaust denialism. “There is a REASON the liberal media fills the airwaves with programs about the NAZI and the ‘6 million Jews’ they murdered,” Robinson wrote. “There is also a REASON those same liberals DO NOT FILL the airwaves with programs about the Communist and the 100+ million PEOPLE they murdered throughout the 20th century.”

Robinson’s incendiary statements have not been exclusively focused on Jews. He has also expressed bigoted views on gay and transgender people as well as Muslims and Black people, while promoting conspiracy theories about abortion. He has compared the procedure to a “moral evil like slavery,” despite acknowledging that he and his wife had once chosen to terminate her pregnancy.

The lieutenant governor has suggested that he cannot be held responsible for comments he made before he assumed office, even as he has continued to issue inflammatory statements as an elected official. His lack of contrition has angered voters in North Carolina, including Jewish leaders who spoke out against him in interviews with JI a month after he assumed office.

At the time, a member of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Raleigh, who asked to remain anonymous, said that he and a group of state activists had been working behind the scenes to arrange a meeting with Robinson to discuss their concerns. The Jewish community member declined to comment on whether the meeting had taken place when reached by JI late last week.

Meanwhile, John Hardister, a Republican

state representative in North Carolina, said he had helped broker a meeting between Robinson and some Jewish community members in Greensboro, at their behest.

In an email exchange with JI, Hardister said that the meeting — which was first reported by Raleigh’s *News & Observer* on Thursday — had taken place “a couple of years ago,” after he was “approached by members of the Jewish community in Greensboro who raised concerns about” a remark from Robinson. “I can’t recall exactly what the comment was,” he said.

“I then contacted Mark Robinson, who agreed to participate in a virtual meeting with members of the Jewish community to discuss the matter,” Hardister explained. “Mark Robinson was gracious with his time, he listened to the concerns, and he was very forthright in clarifying what he meant. I felt it was a productive dialogue and I believe the participants appreciated his cordial demeanor.”

A Jewish community activist who participated in the discussion declined to comment on the meeting.

As Robinson sets his sights on the governorship, members of the organized Jewish community in North Carolina are now hesitant to go on the record with their concerns — at risk of alienating an influential state official who they will likely need to work with if he wins the general election.

“We’ve had to think through how we go about our community relations knowing that that is something that could happen in the future,” one Jewish leader confided in a recent interview with JI. “If we do something to associate ourselves with anybody who’s an outspoken racist or anti-LGBT person or antisemite or etcetera,” he added, “what does that say about us to platform something like that?”

In anticipation of Robinson’s bid, among other dynamics shaping the coming cycle, a group of Jewish Democrats in North Carolina recently launched a new Jewish caucus as part of a broader effort among party activists to boost organizing efforts before the 2024 election.

Matt Sadinsky, the group’s acting president, told JI in February that the caucus was created “to promote candidates and policies that reject the politics of

hatred, prejudice, bigotry, homophobia and division.”

He declined to provide an update on the caucus’ efforts last week, saying in a text message that it was “too early” to reveal any concrete plans.

Eric Solomon, a founding co-chair of the North Carolina Jewish Clergy Association and a Conservative rabbi in Raleigh who has been publicly critical of Robinson, called the lieutenant governor “notorious” in an interview shortly before the caucus was formed a couple of months ago. “I wish there was a Republican Jewish caucus giving a rebuke to the lieutenant governor over there,” he told JI.

But while Robinson has drawn criticism from the Republican Jewish Coalition, whose chief executive has said his “refusal to apologize is troubling and unacceptable,” the lieutenant governor has otherwise faced little resistance from GOP leaders in North Carolina as he has risen to prominence.

The party has long been at pains to control the governorship in North Carolina, even as it recently claimed veto-proof supermajorities in both chambers of the state legislature after a Democratic lawmaker defected to the GOP earlier this month. ♦

How Montana Tucker's TikTok series on antisemitism made it to the White House

Last month, the social media influencer known for her dance videos did a sit-down interview with Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, who, like her, had recently visited Auschwitz

By Gabby Deutch

Scroll through Montana Tucker's TikTok feed, and you're greeted with a dizzying variety of bright colors and dance moves that look impossible. The crystal-clear skies and electric blue ocean waves of Santa Monica provide an envy-inducing backdrop to the short videos.

Last month, the dancer and social media influencer — she has 9 million followers on TikTok and nearly 3 million on Instagram — swapped her workout clothes for a suit, and traded Hollywood for Washington, D.C. Tucker was in the nation's capital to participate in the inaugural White House Jewish Women's Forum, and to do a sit-down interview with Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, who, like her, had recently visited Auschwitz.

"We're two completely different people with completely different followings, and it was really powerful for us to come together to do something like that," Tucker told *Jewish Insider* in an interview.

Like Emhoff, Tucker is using her platform to educate her diverse followers about antisemitism and share with them stories about her Jewish upbringing. The 30-year-old dancer and singer grew up in the heavily Jewish Boca Raton, Fla., where her family went to High Holiday services and where she studied for her bat mitzvah. (When her dancing and modeling career picked up, her bat mitzvah got put on hold — until she went to Israel as a young adult and had a coming-of-age service at the Western Wall.)

But Tucker's most formative Jewish moments were those she spent with her grandparents, both of whom survived the Holocaust.

"Their whole lives, they were dedicated to Holocaust education. My *zaide* even wore

a pin that said 'Never forget. Never again,'" she recalled. "Every person they met, he let them know he's a Holocaust survivor."

Tucker traveled to Poland last summer with her mother, Michelle, to visit Auschwitz and learn about the country's Jewish community before World War II and bear witness to the Nazis' destruction. The emotional journey culminated with a 10-part docuseries that Tucker posted on her social media channels last fall. In April, her series was nominated for a Webby Award, which recognizes Internet content.

Visiting Auschwitz was an easy decision for Tucker, but posting the videos — adding the heavy, dark, emotional content to a feed that's usually bursting with light — was a harder call.

"I wasn't sure what was going to happen from it," Tucker said. "I slowly took over my social media for 10 days of something that is so heavy and so important. I had to say no to brand deals and other things that I had to post."

For a social media influencer, cultivating a brand — and gaining the followers who come to know and love that brand — is the most important currency. She wondered if she would be giving that up by dramatically refocusing her feeds for a week and a half.

But Tucker has been blown away by the reaction and the messages that have flowed into her account. Most came from people who are not Jewish who thanked her for teaching them about something that was legitimately new to them. But many messages also came from Jews who were surprised, and excited, to learn that Tucker is Jewish.

"They didn't want to tell anyone they were Jewish because they were scared and ashamed, and then seeing my series, they

felt really inspired, and they said I instilled this new pride in them," she said.

In her conversation with Emhoff at the White House, he shared a similar story. An 80-year-old woman he met recently said to him, "I have lived my whole life in hiding as a Jewish person. But after seeing you out there talking so openly and joyfully about being Jewish, I am going to spend the rest of my days living that way."

Tucker's social media following is roughly equivalent to the number of Jews who lived in Europe before the Nazis came to power. But many of her followers knew very little, or nothing, about the Holocaust and modern-day antisemitism. She highlighted data that showed how antisemitism in the United States has reached record levels, and reminded her followers about the 2018 mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue that killed 11 worshippers at a morning service.

The video series, called "How to: Never Forget," teaches a rough history of the Holocaust, and follows an emotional Tucker from the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, Poland, to a forest where thousands of Jews were slaughtered, to Auschwitz, the Nazis' deadliest concentration camp. In one scene, she and her mother hold each other after finding their great-grandparents and grandparents, respectively, in the "Book of Names," which lists millions of the Jews who died in the Holocaust.

"My grandparents would've wanted this. They spoke at the schools. They wanted, just, education," Tucker said in the final video, sitting on the train tracks that lead into the camp. She started to cry. "We did it."

Recently, her feed has returned to her usual programming, with Tucker full of smiles as she dances to the latest viral TikTok choreography. She is often dancing

with a partner — ranging from professionals to little kids to women in wheelchairs — to show that dancing is for everyone.

“Everyone’s bonding over their love of music and dance, and that’s really special, to

bring everyone together,” she said.

But Tucker isn’t done teaching her followers about Judaism. Last week, she appeared on a pre-Passover segment of “The Kelly Clarkson Show” to speak about

antisemitism. And she hopes to go back to Israel later this year for the first time since she was there a decade ago.

It’s a “big priority for me,” Tucker said. ♦

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Establishment Republican donors reckoning with Trump’s staying power

The Republicans JI spoke to this week were divided on the question of supporting Trump if he becomes the nominee again

By Matthew Kassel

As former President Donald Trump dominates the Republican primary field, leading GOP donors and Trump skeptics are, however reluctantly, beginning to reckon with a new reality: that Trump seems increasingly likely to win the nomination in 2024.

“The sense that I get is there’s pretty much a resignation he’s going to be the nominee,” Joel Geiderman, a physician in West Hollywood, Calif., who sits on the board of the Republican Jewish Coalition, acknowledged in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Thursday.

“Based upon my circle of friends and my informal survey,” said Jon Tucker, a GOP activist in Pittsburgh, “there’s just a fervent hope and prayer that, somehow, Trump will get out of the way and allow other candidates to get back in.”

“Right now, I don’t see anybody else getting traction,” concluded a prominent Republican donor in Chicago, who expects that Trump will win the nomination. “It makes me feel that people like me, the ‘before Trump’ Republicans, don’t have a home,” he sighed.

Even as the nearly dozen Republican donors interviewed by JI declined to back the former president in the primary, they were divided on the question of supporting Trump if he becomes the nominee again.

“There’s no one I see the Democrats

putting up that means I would not support Trump being the nominee,” one top Republican donor explained, noting that he appreciated Trump’s policies, if not his personal conduct, as president. “Obviously, he has issues with respect to his, you know, temperament and pettiness, which I think helped cause him to lose.”

Still, the donor was otherwise cautiously optimistic that another candidate may ultimately come forward ahead of the primaries who can “implement” Trump’s agenda “without the noise or baggage,” he said. “Who that person is, man or woman, remains unclear,” the donor told JI. “Trump is definitely doing a good job to lock it all up now.”

In recent weeks, Trump has landed a growing number of congressional endorsements, while building momentum over Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, who is widely expected to launch his presidential campaign in the coming weeks. Meanwhile, Nikki Haley, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations who entered the race in February, has struggled to break out as Trump’s support has surged following the indictment last month from a Manhattan grand jury.

Bernard Hasten, a longtime confidante of former Vice President Mike Pence — who is now weighing a White House bid of his own — said he would not vote for Trump

in the primary if there are other Republican candidates on the ballot. But, he added, “If Donald Trump is the Republican nominee for president and the Democratic nominee is Joe Biden, I’d pick Donald Trump hands down.”

He emphasized, however, that he would not donate to Trump’s campaign. “Is he my first choice in any way shape or form?” Hasten said. “No.”

“If there’s some wonderful Democrat who comes out of the woodwork” and is “middle-of-the road and somewhat reasonable,” Hasten told JI, “that could change my view in the general election.”

Alan Sager, a board member of the Republican Jewish Coalition who lives in Austin, Texas, said he knows some GOP activists who have claimed they “will hold their nose” and pull the lever for Trump in the general. “But nobody that I talk to [says] that ‘I’m going to vote for Biden if Trump is nominated,’” he said in an interview on Thursday. “They realize that ultimately they’ve got a binary choice.”

For his part, Sager was alone among Republican donors who spoke with JI in suggesting that he would consider voting for Trump in the primary. “I’m WWS: we will see,” he said. “Obviously, if he’s nominated, I will support him,” Sager added, emphasizing that he approved of the former president’s policies. “It’s all the other stuff around him

that's a problem."

To a handful of donors, however, "the other stuff" remains largely disqualifying, they said in conversations with JI this week. "I can say pretty definitively that I would not support him," said the Republican donor from Chicago who believes Trump will win the nomination. "His personal behavior got so far outside any realm of acceptability for me that I cannot support him."

He said he "will be donating to almost any other Republican" in the GOP contest. If Trump wins, he said he would leave his ballot blank or support a third-party candidate in the general election.

Trump's "personal flaws don't befit a person who's running for president of the United States," said Geiderman, the West Hollywood physician, who has written publicly about why he is unable to vote for Trump. Even as he looked favorably upon the former president's accomplishments in the Middle East, he said in a recent opinion piece for the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, "no past accomplishment can make up for Trump's moral unraveling, and he must be held to account."

"As far as the Jewish community goes, there are people who feel, especially around

what a great friend he was for Israel, a loyalty to him," said a Republican pro-Israel donor in Columbus, Ohio, who does not share that sentiment.

Still, his "sense" is there are "a lot of people in Republican Jewish politics" who "want to win with a more traditional" candidate, he said, rather than a nominee like Trump who has advocated for an isolationist approach to foreign policy — most prominently his willingness to cut off aid to Ukraine as it defends itself from Russia's invasion.

The donor said he is hosting a small fundraiser in Columbus next month for Haley, a pro-Israel stalwart who has expressed support for continued U.S. military assistance to Ukraine. "Even if she didn't have a chance, and I think she does, I think she deserves our support and appreciation and thanks," he explained.

Tucker, the Republican in Pittsburgh who is involved in pro-Israel activism, said he is enthusiastic about Haley as well as Tim Scott, the GOP senator from South Carolina who recently launched a presidential exploratory committee. He said that he would "be on the sidelines" if Trump secures the party's nomination. Tucker, an orthopedic surgeon who is close with

Dr. Mehmet Oz, invoked a medical term to describe his approach to the presidential race. "Active neglect, we used to call it in surgery," he quipped.

Eric Levine, a prominent GOP fundraiser who sits on the board of the Republican Jewish Coalition, is also leaning toward Haley and Scott, he said. Trump, he argued, "is the one Republican who could not win" in a general election matchup with Biden. "Therefore, I don't think we should stop trying to find somebody else to nominate."

If Trump is the nominee, however, he said he would focus his attention on winning back the Senate — a loss he attributes to the former president's conduct during the 2020 election. "Donald Trump gave us wokeism," Levine, who is hosting a major fundraiser for the Senate Republicans' campaign arm in Manhattan next month, charged in a recent interview with JI. "Donald Trump gave us the progressives. Donald Trump gave us Joe Biden. His losing the Senate intentionally gave the country to the progressives. And then, of course, Jan. 6 speaks for itself."

While Levine voted for Trump in 2020, he said, "I would never vote for him again." ♦

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In 'Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret,' a fictional crisis of faith at a real-life synagogue

A new film adaptation of Judy Blume's beloved novel, first published in 1970, will be released on Friday

By Gabby Deutch

For generations, Judy Blume's 1970 coming-of-age classic *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* has made girls on the cusp of adolescence laugh, cry and commiserate over the realities of their changing bodies.

But the beloved novel, which has sold millions of copies, is about more than a

sixth grader who both dreads and anxiously awaits her first period as a harbinger of adulthood. A new movie adaptation of the book, the first feature film adaptation of any of Blume's novels, depicts a girl grappling with the drama and indignities of middle school while also thinking deeply about a topic that is perhaps more scary to her than

puberty: religion.

"What struck me was how profound Margaret's spiritual journey is," Kelly Fremont Craig, the film's director, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "That's something I did not remember from when I was a kid reading it. So that was actually a big part of why I wanted to make the film,

because I felt like there was this secret, very simple yet profound journey at the center of it that I think a lot of readers miss.”

The movie hews faithfully to the 1970s suburban milieu of the book, which follows 11-year-old Margaret Simon and her interfaith parents from their cramped Manhattan apartment to a spacious but unfamiliar home in the New Jersey suburbs. When she starts sixth grade, Margaret (played by Abby Ryder Fortson) falls in with a group of girls who are obsessed with such crucial questions as where to buy their first bras, when they will first kiss a boy and when they will get their periods. To help her grapple with such a pivotal time, Margaret starts an ongoing conversation with God in her head.

“I remember at that age, taking myself very seriously, so it feels to me right to let their stakes be real stakes,” said Craig. “I think that is part of a big reason why [Blume] has been so beloved by kids who are growing up, because they feel as if somebody gets them.”

Craig, a Blume aficionado, wrote an impassioned letter to the author in 2018 after Blume tweeted that she was for the first time open to adapting her books into movies. Blume, who is 85 and lives in Key West, Fla., has famously avoided feature-film adaptations of her books. Craig’s “love letter” garnered a response, and eventually a deal with Blume, who had enjoyed Craig’s 2016 coming-of-age movie “The Edge of Seventeen.”

“When I first sat down to write the script, for the first two weeks, I was just, like, paralyzed with fear that I was going to screw it up, and everyone, you know, all her 90 million fans were going to just hate me for it,” Craig recalled. The film, which will be released on April 28, has been met with near-universal acclaim.

At the center of both the novel and the film is a spiritual quest. Margaret’s mother is Christian and her father is Jewish, and the couple decided not to expose their daughter to either religion until she’s an adult. Then, she can make her own decision about which religion she wants to be part of. But for an uncertain adolescent, such a choice feels huge — and excruciating.

At that age, “everything felt like life and death,” Craig, who is 42, said of her own life.

“All the awkward things that I was going through which I can now look back and sort of laugh at, at the time was not funny at all.”

A young teacher encourages Margaret to explore religion through a yearlong research project she is required to complete. The next time she returns to Manhattan to visit her grandmother, Margaret shocks her by asking if they can go to temple together. Her paternal grandmother Sylvia, played by Kathy Bates, can hardly contain her delight. But when they go to a Shabbat service together, Margaret is mostly confused by the Hebrew she doesn’t understand.

Most of the film was shot in Charlotte, N.C., and Craig’s location scout suggested they film the temple scene at Temple Israel, a Conservative synagogue.

“I just loved the pink and blue stained glass,” Craig said. “It was very important to me to get every single little detail right in those places, and to capture them in a way that felt respectful, and beautiful, and the best of these religions.” (One scene took place at a Black church with a gospel service, and another followed Margaret and a girl from her school into the vestibule of a Catholic church.)

Craig hired an actor to play the rabbi who would be leading a service in the background while Margaret and Sylvia prayed and whispered to each other in the pews. She also had Rabbi Michael Wolk, the synagogue’s senior rabbi, on hand as a consultant. (However, Wolk admits he has not read *Are You There, God?*)

But after Wolk met the actor to talk to him about how he should act in the role, “the company called me,” Wolk recalled, “and said he doesn’t think he can do it, so would I be willing to take the job on?” He was asked to prepare a very brief sermon and to lead the “congregation” — several hundred extras that did include many members of Temple Israel — in some Hebrew prayers.

“He should get a directing credit, because he basically told me absolutely everything that we needed to do,” Craig said of Wolk.

The scene, which in the movie is just a few minutes, required a 15-hour day of filming in May 2021, with COVID-19 restrictions in place. Wolk had joined the synagogue in the summer of 2020, so the filming was actually the first time he stood on the *bimah* before a full room.

Actors and extras had to put masks back on every five minutes — union rules — but, of course, they could not have masks in a movie set in the 1970s. Wolk noted a few other historical inaccuracies that only the most eagle-eyed Jewish observers might catch: He stood on the bimah with a female cantor, but the Conservative movement did not ordain female cantors until the 1980s. And the prayer books held by Sylvia and Margaret were published within the last decade. Temple Israel was only built in the 1990s. The costume department found Wolk a 1970s-era black robe and a *tallit* to better match the look of the movie, but Wolk pointed out that he also forgot to take off his Apple Watch once the cameras were running.

In the movie, Margaret learns from her mother, Barbara (played by Rachel McAdams), that the reason they never see her maternal grandparents is because they cut off communication after Barbara married her Jewish husband, Herb (played by Benny Safdie). Craig mostly kept to the book — but one scene that she wrote entirely on her own is an unexpected and uncomfortable dinner party with the Simons, Sylvia and her Miami Beach beau, and Barbara’s parents from Ohio. Sylvia raises her glass to make a toast, and says “L’Chaim” over and over again, emphasizing the guttural pronunciation, much to her in-laws’ horror. The night does not end well.

“I felt that it was important sort of as a runway to Margaret’s crises, you know, her crisis of faith, and also just the crisis of her changing body. All of it. I just wanted it to all come to a head in that moment,” said Craig. “I also wanted nobody to be right or wrong. Everybody is just doing the best they can and trying to do what they think is right.”

Blume has given the movie her seal of approval, and the film has been met with delight by women and girls of all ages. “If they just advertised to tween girls, they were going to miss so much of our audience,” Craig said of the many women who grew up with Blume’s books. “When I read it as a kid,” she added, “it just made me feel normal at a time where I really needed to feel normal.” ♦

Kyrsten Sinema's consistency on reform — in the U.S. and in Israel

The Arizona Independent said proposal to weaken Israel's Supreme Court would be 'a complete breakdown of separation of powers' but backs some reform

By Gabby Deutch

After Arizona Democrats publicly censured Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ) last summer for her vote to maintain the filibuster, the first-term senator asserted the importance of checks and balances in Washington and pledged not to overturn the storied Senate institution that requires 60 senators to vote to move forward with legislation.

So when she told *Jewish Insider* on Thursday that one major component of Israel's proposed judicial reforms would be "a complete breakdown of separation of powers," she spoke from experience as a senator who has sought to maintain some semblance of balance in a deeply divided Washington.

"Most of us who believe in democracy would be concerned about a proposal that would allow the Knesset to overturn the Supreme Court," Sinema said in an interview in her Senate hideaway, a small windowless room with brightly colored modern furniture that matches her predilection for eye-catching outfits.

"I was happy to see that [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi [Netanyahu] stepped back from some of his proposed plans, because it was obvious that the people of Israel did not support those plans. It also seems fairly obvious that judicial reform is needed," said Sinema. One element of Netanyahu's proposed judicial reform would allow Israel's Knesset to override rulings from the Supreme Court. That clause has been targeted in months of widespread protests throughout Israel.

"Is it our job to tell Israel what to do? Absolutely not," she continued. "Is it our role to provide an example and to seek influence, not in what they should do, but in highlighting areas of danger of what not to

do? That makes sense."

Since her election in 2018, the Arizona senator has frustrated Democrats by taking a more moderate stance and spurning the party on some major votes, most notably on rolling back the legislative filibuster. Late last year, she formally changed her party affiliation from Democrat to Independent. Ever since, she has lost her base of Democratic support, and polls show her lagging in third place in a likely three-way Senate race. Sinema has not yet said whether she will run for reelection next year, and declined to comment on her future plans.

"I'm not going to answer," she said when asked whether she will run again.

"The decision to re-register as an independent was really a natural extension of who I am and how I've operated over my career," said Sinema. "To be honest, it's not even specifically about any policy ideas. It's more about the idea that you can make your own decisions, and you don't have to follow the strict demands of one political party or the other."

Sinema began her political career two decades ago as an antiwar activist and local spokesperson for the left-wing Green Party. Now, her foreign-policy positions are much closer to the moderate bipartisan Washington consensus, like support for U.S. aid to Israel and continued military and financial assistance to Ukraine.

Sinema pledged to continue supporting Ukraine "for the long haul." But, she added, "the challenge we face is that the bureaucracy is real slow," and said the money and military supplies appropriated by Congress take too long to get to Ukraine. Sinema voted in March in favor of Republican-sponsored legislation that would create an office to

oversee U.S. aid to Ukraine, but the measure failed.

"If Ukraine is not successful, if [Russian President Vladimir] Putin wins, he will immediately expand to other countries," Sinema noted. "It will also send a message to the other rogue nations that they can act without impunity as well. So it sends a message to China, Iran and others that they too can behave in that way."

She extended this thinking to other countries that are attacked or marginalized by "rogue nations," and argued that damage to those nations is also damaging to the U.S.

"When one rogue regime, or the regimes that don't share our long-term interests and goals — there's Russia and China and Iran and North Korea, etc. — when they undermine or damage or seek to hurt a country such as Israel, that impacts their posture towards us, as well as their posture towards other countries," Sinema explained. "When a country that is an ally of ours is damaged, particularly one that is such a bastion of freedom and democracy like Israel, and all alone in the region, if they are damaged or undermined, then that means that they're coming for us next."

Washington has "a duty and a responsibility," Sinema said, "to ensure that we are clear in our words and our behavior about the threat that Iran poses to us, to Israel and to other nations in the region," including in conversations with Saudi Arabia, which has moved to renew diplomatic ties with Iran.

Sinema acknowledged that Washington's relationship with Riyadh is "complicated, but said "it would be a mistake to simply cut off the country entirely."

"Keeping Saudi Arabia connected to the U.S. for a variety of reasons is important,"

she said. “It is also important, though, to make sure that Saudi Arabia knows that we’re not comfortable and that we don’t like or support behaviors, such as building a coalition with Iran, which represents an existential threat to the region and the world.”

Sinema has not made foreign policy a cornerstone of her work in the Senate,

although she has become increasingly vocal on border security and immigration issues. In March, she traveled to Mexico on a bipartisan congressional delegation that met with Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador and other top officials working on immigration and drug-related issues. She chairs the Border Management Subcommittee in the Senate Homeland

Security Committee.

Despite Sinema’s eagerness to discuss her work on foreign policy, she did not want to say whether she identifies as a hawk or a dove.

“I don’t know that I define myself,” she said. “That’s not really my thing.” ♦

APRIL 27, 2023

In Jerusalem, DeSantis teases presidential announcement

‘If there’s any announcements on this, they will come at the appropriate time,’ the Florida Republican said at a press conference following his appearance at the Celebrate the Faces of Israel event

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis teased a potential 2024 presidential run at a conference in Jerusalem on Thursday morning. “If there’s any announcements on this, they will come at the appropriate time,” the Florida Republican said at a press conference following his appearance at the Celebrate the Faces of Israel event, a project of *The Jerusalem Post* and the Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem.

DeSantis also downplayed a report from NBC News last night that he is expected to announce a presidential bid as soon as mid-May.

In DeSantis’ keynote address at the museum, he highlighted Florida’s growing Jewish and expat Israeli community, the state’s flourishing economic ties with Israel as well as his own unwavering support for the Jewish state.

“The task before us as Americans is to stand strongly and forthrightly with Israel and with the Jewish people,” DeSantis said.

“We must support Israel’s right to defend itself, and that includes strong military and important intelligence cooperation,” DeSantis, who was in Israel as part of a global tour that includes stops in Japan,

South Korea and the U.K., continued. “That also includes supporting Israel to maintain its qualitative military superiority with systems such as Iron Dome.”

“We must also ensure that however the future political winds may blow, the U.S. embassy will always be right here in Jerusalem — that’s never going to change,” DeSantis said. “The U.S. must defend Israel against unfavorable treatment by the United Nations and other international bodies and must reject those who reject Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state — that is antisemitism.”

The governor also received applause when he spoke about the views he shares with Israel on Iran as a top adversary of the U.S. and Israel.

“We share that Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons creates a risk in this region, their ideology, and apocalyptic ideology combined with the ability to use humanity’s worst weapons represents a threat, an existential threat to the State of Israel, and it represents a threat to the United States of America,” DeSantis said.

Ahead of his address, the Florida governor met with Israeli President Isaac

Herzog, and said he is also scheduled to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his stay.

On the Israeli government’s controversial proposal for judicial reforms that has seen ongoing mass demonstrations in Israel and has even drawn criticism from President Joe Biden, who said he would refrain for now from inviting Netanyahu for an official diplomatic visit to the White House, DeSantis said America must respect Israel’s right to make its own decisions about its own governance.

“We must be a strong ally and not butt into Israel’s internal affairs,” he said. “It seems to me, that it’s healthy to flush this stuff out... you’re a smart country, you’ll figure it out, it shouldn’t be for us to butt into these important issues.”

DeSantis also addressed the Abraham Accords normalization agreements that were signed by former President Donald Trump’s administration in 2020, calling for the U.S. to “recommit to the framework of the Abraham Accords and build a strong alliance between the U.S. and Sunni Arab States.”

DeSantis, who signed a declaration

affirming Florida's special relationship with Israel later at a packed press conference, emphasized that Israel is one of America's most valued and trusted allies and that maintaining a strong U.S.-Israel relationship has been a priority for him during his time in office.

He talked about previous trips to Israel, including bringing one of the largest U.S. trade delegations to the country in 2019 and various economic agreements with large Israeli companies. He also announced that the state's Avenger Flight Group will work with El Al to build a training center in Israel.

DeSantis noted that he and his wife, Casey, gathered holy water from the Sea of Galilee to baptize their three children, drawing warm applause from the audience, which also included Museum of Tolerance Chairman Larry Mizel, prominent Denver attorney and super-lobbyist Norm Brownstein, philanthropists Miriam Adelson and Sylvan Adams, venture capitalists Yitz Applbaum, Michael Granoff and Max Fink, RJC's Matt Brooks and former U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman.

DeSantis also spoke about his

fight against the BDS movement and antisemitism in his state, saying that Florida has led the way on combating the scourge of antisemitism.

"When your focus is only on the one Jewish state and you hold them up to a different standard than you hold up every other country in the world and when you work to excuse bad conduct from so many rogue regimes throughout the rest of the world – when you have that frame of reference, that is antisemitism," he said. ♦

APRIL 26, 2023

In electability pitch, Nikki Haley tests out 'consensus' line on abortion

'Whether we can save more lives nationally depends entirely on doing what no one has done to date – finding consensus,' the former U.N. ambassador said in a speech in Virginia

By Matthew Kassel

In declaring that she will reach for "consensus" in her first major policy speech to address abortion on Tuesday, Nikki Haley, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, sent a clear message that she hopes to be seen as the GOP candidate best positioned to challenge President Joe Biden in the 2024 election.

Even as Haley emphasized that she is unapologetically "pro-life," the 51-year-old Republican suggested that she would embrace a more pragmatic approach to abortion — in what doubled as an electability pitch that drew a contrast with GOP rivals who are embracing more conservative positions.

"You don't save any lives if you can't enact your position into law, and you can't do that unless you find consensus," Haley said during a 20-minute speech at the Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America headquarters in Northern Virginia. "Reaching consensus starts with humanizing, not demonizing.

Just like I have my story, I respect everyone who has their story. I don't judge someone who is pro-choice any more than I want them to judge me for being pro-life."

Haley, who served as governor of South Carolina, noted that "each state is finding its own consensus, as it should," while adding that a national abortion ban is "not going to happen."

She indicated broadly, however, that there is a "federal role" in addressing the procedure. "Whether we can save more lives nationally depends entirely on doing what no one has done to date – finding consensus," Haley said, returning to her central theme. "That's what I will strive to do."

Haley's attempt to strike a pragmatic tone without offering policy specifics, however, risked giving the appearance that she's playing politics on an issue in which voters have deeply held moral views. "I'm not certain this debate is going to be solved by tone because there are actual specific

governing questions that people have," said Republican strategist Scott Jennings, a CNN commentator and adviser to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY).

In a statement last week, SBA Pro-Life America vowed to "oppose any presidential candidate who refuses to embrace at a minimum a 15-week national standard" for abortion — ruling out former President Donald Trump for claiming that the issue should be decided at the state level.

Haley did not explicitly commit to any standard on Tuesday, despite a follow-up statement from SBA Pro-Life America that lauded the former ambassador for her "commitment" to a limit of "at least 15 weeks."

Eric Tanenblatt, a Republican fundraiser in Atlanta who is supporting Haley's presidential campaign, said he believed that the speech had made Haley "more relatable," as other opponents have struggled to address abortion in recent weeks.

"It was refreshing to hear a candidate articulate their views but not do it in a way that alienates independents and women," he said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. "I think if people saw her remarks today, they would be very pleased."

While the Iowa caucuses are not until next February, Haley, a pro-Israel stalwart who has long been popular among Jewish Republicans, has so far struggled to break out in public polling.

The address came as some GOP prospects have staked out polarizing positions on abortion, most prominently Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who recently passed a controversial six-week abortion ban that has caused some top Republican

donors to reevaluate or even pause their spending.

"Republicans won't win the hearts and minds of Americans unless they're able to address difficult and personal issues with compassion while sticking to our principles," Nachama Soloveichik, Haley's communications director, said in a statement.

In an interview with *JI* on Tuesday, former Bush official Jay Lefkowitz, a Haley backer, said the former ambassador's speech shows she is willing to openly engage with voters on what he described as "a third-rail issue" that is "top of mind for millions" of Americans. "She's not shying away from it," he added.

Leon Goldenberg, a prominent Orthodox Jewish businessman in Brooklyn who has donated to Haley's campaign, said he is comfortable with her position on abortion, even as he believes "there are times when abortion is required" in order to protect the physical safety of the mother. "At the end of the day, we need to have abortion legal but rare," he told *JI*. Haley, he said, "is trying to get to that middle ground without saying she's in favor of abortion."

"To be electable in America today, you cannot be completely anti-abortion," Goldenberg concluded. "All you're doing is putting yourself in a corner." ♦

APRIL 24, 2023

Herzog unveils new dialogue initiative, 'Voice of the People,' at JFNA General Assembly

Prime minister decides not to address gathering; demonstrators rally outside – and at times inside – the event, with support from some attendees

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog announced the launch of a new initiative aimed at improving dialogue within the Jewish people and identifying new young Jewish leaders at the opening session of the Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly in Tel Aviv on Sunday night.

The General Assembly, which lasts through Wednesday, is being held in Israel this year, as it is every five years, though in this case the organizers decided to hold it in the spring instead of the fall to give attendees the opportunity to mark Israeli Memorial Day, Yom Hazikaron, and Independence Day, Yom Ha'atzmaut. The gathering also comes during a time of heightened tensions in Israel as regular demonstrations have rocked the country for the past four months

over the government's proposed judicial overhaul.

Those protests spilled over into the General Assembly, with hundreds of demonstrators chanting and holding signs and flags outside the opening gala in Tel Aviv's expo center – and in some cases inside as well.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was invited to speak at the event on Sunday night, bowed out hours before the start of the gala. His decision became one of the main topics of discussion by attendees, with some telling *eJewishPhilanthropy* that they saw it as a positive development as it removed a potential point of friction and discomfort, while others considered it a missed opportunity, both to hear from the premier and to give the attendees an opportunity to experience Israel's current political debate

first-hand.

In her remarks, JFNA chair Julie Platt referred to the protesters outside the venue, who could at times be heard in the main hall. "To the protesters, we see you, we hear you and we are inspired by your love of Israel," Platt said, prompting a standing ovation from the crowd.

The gala event was not only hosted by the JFNA but by the World Zionist Organization, which held a congress last week; the Jewish Agency for Israel, which held a board of governors meeting earlier in the day; and Keren Hayesod, which is holding its annual conference this week.

Herzog noted these current contentions in his remarks, as well as fraying ties between Israel and Diaspora Jewry.

"I am convinced that there is no greater existential threat to our people than the one that comes from within: our own

polarization and alienation from one another,” he said.

Herzog’s proposal to address those rifts was “*Kol Ha’am*—Voice of the People: The President’s Initiative for Worldwide Jewish Dialogue,” which was developed jointly by his office, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization. The Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation provided the initial stage of funding, the president’s office said.

Herzog said the initiative is meant to serve as a “Jewish Davos” and a “global Jewish *beit midrash*,” a house of study, where Jews from around the world can gather and debate – not necessarily reach consensus.

“Disagreement — rather than pushing us apart — can be the force that builds us and binds us,” he said, quoting Pirkei Avot 5:17, “Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure.”

Herzog said the goal of *Kol Ha’am* was both to improve dialogue and to identify and develop young Jewish leaders.

“I consider this to be its most important function. We need our best and our brightest to show up on the front lines for our people. To pool their resources of vision, courage, and capability to help position our nation to survive and to thrive,” Herzog said.

To develop this initiative, Herzog’s office said it will work with the international consulting firm Deloitte to hold a series of “strategic labs” in “fourteen major Jewish centers, across six continents, and

contribute to his vision of a global council for Jewish dialogue.”

These sessions will be held over June and early July in Israel, New York; Miami; Chicago; Los Angeles; Mexico City; Toronto; Buenos Aires, Argentina; São Paolo; Johannesburg; London; Paris; Budapest and Melbourne, Australia, and in virtual labs in Hebrew and English, his office said.

The General Assembly this year was deliberately kept low on content this year in order to offer the attendees more opportunity to experience Israel’s 75th Independence Day commemorations, JFNA President and CEO Eric Fingerhut told eJP ahead of the event.

The only formal programming is being held on Monday, including a tense session titled “A Jew is a Jew is a Jew: The Law of Return and Defining What Qualifies as ‘Jewish Enough,’” which included a panel with Knesset Member Simcha Rothman of the Religious Zionism party, who is one of the architects of the government’s proposed judicial overhaul, as well as Yohanan Plesner of the Israel Democracy Institute and Alex Rif, the founder and CEO of the One Million Lobby, which represents the interests of Russian-speaking Israelis.

The session, which did not directly deal with the proposed reforms, was repeatedly interrupted by protesters – some Israelis, some visiting attendees – most of whom were escorted out by security. Following repeated disruptions, the organizers called for a short break and asked attendees to not

interrupt again. Though the panel was able to continue, it was again disrupted several more times before coming to a close.

Meanwhile, the other sessions being held at the same time were far more collegial, attendees said.

“It was like a tale of two GAs,” National Council of Jewish Women CEO Sheila Katz told eJP.

At the session, “Celebrating the Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People,” Paula Pretlow was honored for being selected as the next chair of the board of the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.

“It was all about inclusivity and acceptance,” said Katz, who on Saturday night gave the first English-language address at the weekly protest in Tel Aviv against the proposed judicial overhaul.

In the afternoon, opposition leader Yair Lapid appeared before the main plenary. He opened his speech with a not-so-subtle critique of Netanyahu’s decision to cancel his appearance, saying it was “good to be here... unlike some others,” which drew chuckles from the crowd. Lapid then reiterated a call he made to U.S. Jewish leaders in New York earlier this month, stressing the importance of the Israel-Diaspora relationship.

At the end of the afternoon plenary, the delegates boarded buses and traveled to the Latrun memorial site, where they were scheduled to commemorate *Yom Hazikaron* with participants of Masa. ♦