

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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OCTOBER 19, 2023

Pro-Israel progressives begin to crack down on growing far-left extremism toward Israel

Sens. Chris Murphy, John Fetterman and Rep. Jerry Nadler all condemn anti-Israel activists

By Matthew Kassel

Progressive pro-Israel lawmakers and activists are gradually beginning to crack down on extreme voices from the hard left as a range of outspoken anti-Zionist groups have grown increasingly radical amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas.

The most high-profile rebuke came on Wednesday morning from Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY), the informal dean of the House Jewish caucus, who drew unexpected scrutiny to a far-left group, Jewish Voice for Peace, that has held rallies this week in Washington calling for a ceasefire and accusing Israel of committing “genocide” in Gaza.

“Many have asked me ‘who is Jewish Voice for Peace?’” Nadler wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. “Their website says they are ‘proud to be a part of the global, Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment

and Sanctions (BDS) movement,’ which, by its founder’s admission and tenets, seeks to end Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”

As a long-standing opponent of the BDS movement, Nadler, an old-school progressive who has continued to uphold his support for Israel even amid shifting attitudes on the left, is hardly a natural ally of Jewish Voice for Peace, which helped organize a demonstration at the Capitol on Wednesday where dozens of protestors were arrested while occupying a House office building.

The Anti-Defamation League condemned the protest, which was co-organized with IfNotNow, a like-minded activist group. The two organizations also organized a demonstration on Monday outside the White House at which multiple protestors were arrested.

Nadler’s decision to publicly highlight

Jewish Voice for Peace, hours before its protest began on Wednesday on the National Mall, represents a notable shift among progressive pro-Israel Democrats who are now pushing back against far-left organizations that continue to downplay Hamas’ terrorism while decrying Israel’s response to the atrocities.

The congressman said in a statement to *Jewish Insider* that he and his office had “been asked by other members of Congress, constituents, parents and members of the press corps about JVP,” adding: “I wanted to be sure that people are aware of what JVP itself says about its own connection to the global BDS movement. BDS is firmly rejected by the overwhelming majority of the Jewish community, left, right and center.”

A representative for Jewish Voice for Peace’s political advocacy arm did not respond to a request for comment.

Jake Dilemani, a Democratic strategist who lives in Nadler's heavily progressive district in Upper Manhattan, estimated that an "overwhelming majority" of the congressman's constituents would support his approach to the group. "For Nadler to come out and say what he said makes perfect sense," Dilemani told JI, citing recent polls showing a dramatic uptick in Democratic support for Israel in the wake of the attacks. "People don't want to pay lip service to the far left anymore."

"I think that Rep. Nadler's tweet was eye-opening and very clarifying," said Sara Forman, who leads the New York Solidarity Network, an advocacy group that seeks to promote pro-Israel positions in state and local races. "Hopefully he'll provide the moral clarity and cover that other activists need so they can join him in exposing these fringe groups for what they are."

Rep. Dan Goldman (D-NY), a fellow Jewish Democrat in New York who represents one of the most progressive districts in the country, endorsed Nadler's approach. The congressman "agrees with Mr. Nadler, the most senior Jewish member in the House, who has spent decades steeped in the nuance of America's relationship with Israel, our closest democratic ally in the region," Simone Kanter, a House spokesperson for Goldman, told JI on Wednesday.

In a statement to JI, meanwhile, former Rep. Mondaire Jones (D-NY), a prominent progressive seeking to reclaim his old House seat in a heavily Jewish district in the Lower Hudson Valley, said that he has been "deeply disappointed by organizations and politicians — including some in my own party — who have refused to condemn the atrocities committed by Hamas" two weekends ago. "Terrorism is wrong, and Israel has a right to defend itself."

Within the House, some pro-Israel lawmakers have recently demonstrated that they are even more willing to speak out against colleagues who have equivocated over the attacks while circulating unverified information about the war on social media, among other things.

On Tuesday, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), a Jewish Democrat and stalwart supporter of Israel, issued a rare admonition of a left-wing House colleague,

Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), who was among some lawmakers who had amplified a Hamas-promoted narrative — later discounted by U.S. and Israeli intelligence — blaming Israel for a deadly hospital bombing in Gaza.

"We don't know the facts," Wasserman Schultz fired back in social media comments on Tuesday evening. "You have been training your outrage on the wrong party. We do know that Hamas' hatred is the catalyst."

Prominent progressive lawmakers also pushed back against online commentators who initially promoted claims that Israel had committed the attack on Tuesday. Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) said after a classified briefing on the situation in Israel and Gaza on Wednesday afternoon that he trusted the assessments that Israel was not responsible for the attack.

"I think it's remarkable that so many people were willing to take Hamas' propaganda at face value yesterday," Murphy told JI. "The evidence seems pretty clear that this was not an Israeli operation, and I think it's pretty disturbing that so many mainstream actors weren't willing to believe Israel and were willing to believe Hamas."

Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA), a pro-Israel progressive, went after fellow lawmakers more directly in posts on X. "It's truly disturbing that members of Congress rushed to blame Israel for the hospital tragedy in Gaza," he said on Wednesday. "Who would take the word of a group that just massacred innocent Israeli civilians over our key ally?"

That question speaks to a broader sense of disenchantment among many progressive Jewish activists who have voiced disappointment with the far left over its response to the conflict. "It seems pretty clear to me that most of my fellow progressive Jews have been very frustrated," Oren Jacobson, a progressive Jewish activist in Chicago, told JI. "I haven't spoken to a single person who is out there fighting the occupation who has said to me, 'I'm OK with what's going on with the far left.'"

In an interview, Jacobson said he has been "shocked by the lack of empathy and concern that has been demonstrated for not just Israelis but the entire global Jewish community" since the attacks. Referring in particular to Jewish Voice for Peace

and IfNotNow, whose initial statement on Hamas' attacks accused "Israel's system of apartheid" of provoking the massacre, he said it has now become "abundantly clear that those two organizations just do not speak for the overwhelming global Jewish community right now."

A spokesperson for IfNotNow, Matan Arad-Neeman, did not address a request for comment regarding Jacobson's assessment. "As many of us mourn loved ones who were killed by Hamas's attack," he said in an email to JI, "thousands of Jews are coming together this week to take action to call for a ceasefire, a release of Israeli hostages, and to prevent a looming genocide against Palestinians in Gaza."

Joe Vogel, a Jewish Democrat and state legislator running for Congress in Maryland, cautioned that statements from IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace should "be viewed through the prism of who they are: fringe organizations that are far, far outside of the mainstream views of American Jews writ large."

"That is why I encourage folks not to tokenize them or their views in order to portray that they are somehow representative of the larger community," he said in a text message to JI on Wednesday. "As you can see from their statements, they fail to offer a full-throated condemnation of Hamas, shamefully pinning all the blame on Israel for the deadliest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust."

Bill de Blasio, the former mayor of New York City and a staunch supporter of Israel, echoed that view. "There's no evidence I've ever seen that suggests, outside of certain college campuses and certain very narrow elements of the far left, there's any lack of energetic support for Israel," he said in an interview with JI, even as he added that "there should be no one who fails to condemn" Hamas' terrorist attacks.

Far-left voices weighing in on the conflict with insensitive or divisive rhetoric are "invalidating their position and alienating a lot of people who might want to hear from them otherwise," de Blasio argued. "It does not serve their cause."

Chris Coffey, a Democratic strategist in New York, said that the hard left has "very much misread the moment," alluding to a recent Times Square rally promoted by the

Democratic Socialists of America that drew widespread criticism for supporting Hamas. “This is a watershed moment for support of Israel,” he told JI. “If you can’t condemn terrorists and call for the release of innocent Jewish children, taken in a sneak attack, then you can’t call yourself pro-Israel.”

Despite the divisions, some progressive pro-Israel activists say the backlash to far-

left fringe groups has been clarifying.

“There continues to be a space for Zionist Jews on the left, of course — and we’ve felt more solidarity and received more vocal support than ever before,” Amanda Berman, the founder of Zioness, told JI. “The splintering between those with conscience and humanity, and those glorifying and celebrating evil, could potentially have

long-lasting positive consequences for a progressive movement that claims to care, first and foremost, about human rights and dignity.”

Additional reporting contributed by JI’s Capitol Hill reporter Marc Rod. ♦

OCTOBER 16, 2023

As death toll rises, Israelis fuming at government’s failures

Thousands of Israelis have stepped in to assist the victims and boost morale of soldiers bracing for a looming ground war in Gaza

By Ruth Marks Eglash, Tamara Zieve, Lahav Harkov, Judah Ari Gross

As Israelis continue to count the dead from the mass terror attack carried out by Hamas, and brace for a likely prolonged war in Gaza, the country is fuming over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s failure to prevent the heinous assault — and the government’s delayed and disorganized response in helping the thousands of victims and addressing the families of those still missing.

Even as the government’s failures in the face of the worst attack the Jewish people have experienced since the Holocaust continue to come to light, Israeli citizens have shown incredible resilience.

Thousands of ordinary people have stepped in to assist where the government has fallen short, providing shelter and essential items — food, clothing and emotional support — to the estimated 50,000 Israelis who have fled from southern border communities and to the soldiers, including 360,000 reservists, as they gear up for what military leaders are warning could be a prolonged war.

On Saturday, one week after Hamas’ attack in which more than 1,300 people were killed and an estimated 160 people were taken hostage in the Gaza Strip, hundreds joined a vigil in Tel Aviv being held by the families of those still missing.

Initiated by Avihai Broditz, whose wife,

Hagar, and three children are being held in the Palestinian enclave, many of those who joined held signs with the names of the missing and others waved Israeli flags or displayed banners saying Netanyahu was responsible for the attack. Some called on him, and other members of the government, to resign.

Facing the music

Throughout the week, Israelis—including those who previously expressed support for Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition — voiced anger over the horrific events.

In two hospitals last week, Israeli ministers were chased from the premises, and even on the pro-Netanyahu Channel 14, some of those interviewed shouted angrily about the frivolous time this government spent on passing contentious legislation instead of focusing on existential security threats. Netanyahu reportedly canceled a speech he had planned to deliver to army reservists after he was cursed by angry soldiers at a base he visited.

During a live television broadcast Saturday night, National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi admitted that Israeli authorities had underestimated Hamas and not taken threats from Gaza seriously enough.

“It was my mistake, of course, and it shows the mistake of all such authorities for many years,” he said, admitting that a few days prior there was intelligence of suspicious Hamas activity but it was not taken seriously enough by the upper levels of the intelligence forces.

And on Sunday night, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich took “responsibility for what happened and responsibility for what will happen.”

“We have to admit with honesty, with pain and with a bowed head — we failed. The country’s leadership and the security system have failed in maintaining the security of our citizens,” Smotrich said during a press conference. “We didn’t succeed in upholding the most important unspoken agreement between a nation and its citizens. It’s a contract signed in blood, and now, it’s stained with blood.”

It took his ministry nine days to approve emergency funding for those who have been evacuated from the south and bolster financial support for the ministries and governmental organizations that are helping the thousands of victims of the attack.

A survey published by the Dialog Center on Thursday showed that an overwhelming majority of Israelis — some 86% of respondents, including 79% of coalition supporters — say that Netanyahu and his

government are to blame for the attack and the current situation.

The poll also found that a whopping 94% of Israelis believe the government should bear some responsibility for the lack of security preparedness that led to the assault, and that 75% said the government holds most of the responsibility.

Flailing response

Beyond the intelligence and assessment failures, there have been widespread reports of the government struggling to respond to the size and scale of the crisis.

On Sunday, Netanyahu finally met with representatives of families whose loved ones are being held hostage in Gaza and he was slow to appoint a coordinator to deal with the crisis. The point person responsible for dealing with kidnapped Israelis quit the position a year ago, and a successor was only appointed after the war broke out.

The army also responded to the civilian hostage situation slowly, opening a central command center to determine how many people had been kidnapped days after the attack. And reports by Israeli media on Sunday noted that Israel has no legal or formal mechanism for dealing with or supporting the hundreds of civilian families now desperate to find their missing relatives.

Those who have fled from the south, parts of which the Israeli army has now declared a closed military zone, are relying on other citizens for vital equipment and goods that they were forced to leave behind in their destroyed homes and communities.

Thousands of reserve soldiers have reported not having the appropriate military equipment needed as they prepare for combat in Gaza, or possibly on the border with Lebanon as events continue to take place in Israel's north. Dozens of WhatsApp groups and centers around the country are seeking out the gear that the reservists need and finding ways to deliver it to bases in both the south and north.

Many bodies of the victims of the terror attack have yet to be identified, with the relevant agencies overwhelmed by the sheer number of them and the condition of some of the corpses, mutilated by Hamas terrorists, which makes the identification process more difficult.

And, with more than 1,000 foreign journalists now in Israel reporting on the war, local public relations professionals, nonprofit organizations and even Israeli journalists stepped in to provide essential information and help in a situation that has overwhelmed the government.

Soon after Saturday's attack, IMPACT-se, an organization focused on incitement to antisemitism and violence in textbooks in the Middle East, shifted its attention to helping the war effort.

Arik Agassi, the organization's COO, opened a WhatsApp group called Gaza War Resource Group, which quickly garnered more than 800 participants. The group was meant "to enable families that have either kidnapped loved ones, missing loved ones, people who survived or lost their loved ones to get their stories to the international press through us," Agassi told *Jewish Insider*. Since the group's formation, Agassi has found support from others, including Jerusalem Press Club CEO Talia Dekel and Number 10 Strategies' Joshua Hantman, in facilitating and streamlining hundreds of inquiries.

"We were seeing pictures and videos of the atrocities and decided to use our expertise with foreign media...to set up a platform for foreign press," he said. "The bombardment of requests was pretty shocking to me, in terms of the volume of information, access and facilitation that was needed."

The group has featured many names, photos and stories of the victims of Hamas' attacks, as well as footage of the massacre at the Nova festival and the assaults on Gaza border towns.

One of the efforts organized through the group was a press conference last week with four families of U.S. citizens who are missing or known to have been abducted by Hamas. The missing Americans were mentioned in President Joe Biden's speech later that day, and Secretary of State Tony Blinken met with them and others when he visited Israel. Biden later spoke to the families by phone for 90 minutes.

In addition, Tal Heinrich, a New York-based journalist for TBN – All Israel News and for Channel 14 in Israel, began serving informally as Netanyahu's international press spokesperson. The position has remained vacant since the prime minister's

return to office and until she stepped in, no one was authorized to brief the foreign media on record. Heinrich has still not been formally appointed.

Israel's Public Diplomacy Ministry, which has a budget of \$3.5 million and is tasked with keeping Israelis and the world informed on events in the country, was largely silent in the days following the terror attack. Public Diplomacy Minister Galit Distel-Atbaryan, who has given few interviews to either the Israeli press or the international press, resigned from the post on Thursday after facing criticism over her lack of action.

Another crucial position that has remained empty for the past six months is that of consul-general in New York, home to the largest Jewish community in the world outside of Israel. Usually a political appointee, the previous consul-general, Asaf Zamir, resigned in March and his deputy, Yisrael Nitzan, a professional diplomat, left his post last month. Netanyahu has also not appointed a new ambassador to France, a key diplomatic posting, since the departure of former Amb. Yael German, who resigned the posting earlier this year.

A nation rallies

In terms of support for the victims, the thousands of Israelis who have lost their homes or experienced the murderous attack, government action has been thin, but ordinary Israelis have filled in, opening up their homes and their hearts with a kindness reminiscent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A day after the attack, Zmira and Eitan Maoz and their four sons escaped from the Gaza border town of Sderot, aided by the military since one of their sons had been called to reserve duty. The couple and their three other sons headed north to Netanya where someone — they don't know who — put them up in a hotel for the night. The next day, they moved into one of 10 apartments in a brand-new building in north Tel Aviv that has been loaned to evacuees from the south by the Migurit company.

"We thought it was a joke at first," Zmira said of the post they saw regarding the apartments; when they arrived, the apartments were empty and within a day

Migurit helped to fully furnish them.

Neighbors from their apartment complex and surrounding ones also helped them.. “We were in shock — we didn’t think we would have all these conditions,” Zmira said.

Throughout the week, she said, “good people,” stopped by with supplies of food, clothes, bed linen, toys and snacks for the children. Zmira, who quickly became the point person for families, said they received so many things that she had to start turning goods away.

“We thought we’d come here and be alone, but the neighbors didn’t let us,” she continued. “There’s nothing like it, we are speechless... I told them that they are angels. All of the people of Israel are together. It’s just a shame that it is only in these types of circumstances.”

Many residents of Sderot, however, have remained there with no official order or assistance enabling them to leave. On Sunday, Sderot Mayor Alon Davidi announced that the state would fund, through the coming week, accommodation for residents of his city.

In addition, private organizations such

as Yad Sarah have been helping residents of the south to leave the area. The medical aid nonprofit has repurposed its wheelchair-accessible van unit and recruited volunteer drivers to facilitate the effort.

As of Friday, the drivers had delivered \$600,000 in medicine, free of charge to individuals in the south, along with other critical supplies such as ventilators, oxygen generators, diapers and breast pumps. Volunteers have evacuated almost 100 residents to safer areas. And, as of Sunday, they had delivered emergency aid to 23,000 wounded individuals.

“There is no one like these people and volunteers who are willing to put down everything and risk their own lives to go help people in the south,” Yaron Aviv, national coordinator of volunteer drivers at Yad Sarah, said in a statement. “Every life they save is a world in and of itself. I’ve been at Yad Sarah for 30 years, and I am blown away by our volunteers’ selfless contributions in this crisis at the same time as my — and all of our — souls are crushed,” he said.

Military assistance

Those now stationed along the front as Israel gears up for a likely ground invasion of Gaza also attest to the kindness and support from ordinary people. In all parts of the country, volunteers have offered their knowledge, expertise and opened their wallets to help the victims and the soldiers — so much so that jokes have even started about the soldiers being too full of food and snacks that they cannot go into battle.

In Tel Aviv, American-Israeli sisters Aliya Fastman and Shaendel Davis said they have transformed their culinary workshop business into a meal service to feed soldiers and other populations in need of home-cooked meals.

They told JI that they are now partnering with local restaurant chains that are supplying them with ingredients and ready-made goods.

As of Saturday, the sisters said they had created a network of 600 volunteers, raised over \$40,000 in donations for their activities, and delivered 2,400 hot meals to displaced persons from the south, bereaved families and shivas, soldiers, and a school for low-income families, many who’ve lost their jobs. ♦

OCTOBER 18, 2023

Biden’s visit: A loving embrace or a bear hug?

US, Israeli officials insist the administration is not tying Israel’s hands, but analysts warn that Washington may be limiting Jerusalem from responding to Hamas and Hezbollah attacks

By Lahav Harkov

When President Joe Biden landed in Israel on Wednesday, he became the first American president to do so in wartime. His speech last week and remarks to Jewish communal leaders who met with him at the White House showed an understanding of Israelis’ and Jews’ pain at this time at a level matched by few, if any, past presidents. The transfer of aircraft carriers to the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf, among other acts, show that Biden’s support was not only in words, but in actions.

However, there are concerns in Israel about Biden’s embrace — as reflected in a headline in Tuesday’s *Yediot Aharonot* calling it a “bear hug” — a phrase that in Hebrew refers to holding someone close in order to restrain him, not just to show love. Prominent military analyst Yossi Yehoshua argued that, while U.S.-Israel cooperation is closer than ever before, the Biden administration may not allow the Jewish state to fully pursue its goals in the war.

“There is a price to this aid, and the time has come to speak about it more clearly and

without being sentimental: The Americans are taking the lead of this war in accordance with their interests in the region,” Yehoshua wrote. “It may be, for example, that Biden is not interested in an active move to remove the Hezbollah threat from [Israeli] towns in the north, and he is certainly interested in being as cautious as possible about a humanitarian disaster in Gaza.”

Yehoshua also warned that Biden’s determination to bring back U.S. hostages may leave Israelis behind in Gaza and require Israel to make concessions without

getting anything in return.

The message reverberated deeply enough for Jerusalem and Washington to address it. Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi opened his press conference on Tuesday by calling the headline “an injustice to a true friend in a time of need.” Then, the White House took things a step further than simply denying that it is not limiting Israel’s response; American officials told Axios that the White House discussed the possibility of joining the fight if Hezbollah attacks Israel.

Biden “is coming to embrace us in a good way, an embrace of love...an embrace for every Israeli and every Jew,” Hanegbi insisted. “We, the prime minister and all Israeli citizens will accept him with gratitude...He not only identifies with our shared pain but also identifies... in his statements and actions with the determination we are showing as a nation and a government to attain the goals of the war until victory.”

The administration’s actions have made it clear to Iran and Hezbollah that “if they think of joining the attack against the citizens of Israel, there will be an American intervention,” Hanegbi said.

Biden’s visit does come with open acknowledgment of at least some strings attached: The administration did not announce the president’s visit to Israel until Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu committed to Israel allowing a humanitarian package into Gaza, the *Washington Post* reported.

Hanegbi confirmed in a press conference on Tuesday that Secretary of State Tony Blinken sat in cabinet meetings “until 3 a.m.,” in which they worked out that aid would go to “safe zones” in southern Gaza — but his remarks betrayed Israeli skepticism about the plan.

“They can be given humanitarian aid under only one condition that we made clear to Blinken, which he shares with us,” Hanegbi said. “The aid will go to the people who we told to [evacuate] to the south, but if it does not get to the people and gets to the murderers and massacrers, there will not be any [aid].”

In addition, Hanegbi said, the “holy” issue of bringing hostages home must be central to any humanitarian efforts.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) railed

against the Biden administration for “placing conditions on our support for Israel because of demands from The Squad.”

“Humanitarian aid repeatedly ends up in the hands of Hamas terrorists who use it to build rockets and kill more Israelis,” she said.

Former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren argued that Israeli public opinion is against humanitarian aid to the Palestinians, making it a loaded political decision domestically.

“The Israeli people do not see the Palestinians as innocent bystanders, they see them as complicit and in some cases actually guilty of mass murder,” he told *Jewish Insider*.

Analysts noted challenges stemming from Biden’s embrace that go far beyond the humanitarian aid package to Gaza.

Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president for policy at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, posited to *JI* that the American diplomatic channels through Qatar and Iran to free hostages could get in the way of Israel’s planned ground incursion.

“This process is ultimately going to inhibit Israel’s ability to act quickly. It already has, and this delay is only going to be extended through Biden’s visit and possibly through [French President Emmanuel] Macron’s visit,” Schanzer said.

That wait “is not cost free for us,” Oren explained. Over 350,000 of the most productive segments of Israel’s economy are doing reserve duty. The “quote-unquote Palestinian suffering” is gaining media attention, even as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to rain rockets on Israel, Oren said.

Plus, Oren said, he is concerned that “there will be growing opinion in American media against an Israeli ground incursion. I see it in Tom Friedman’s column and other people writing against it.”

The longer Israel delays its response, the more deterrence it loses and weakens the American attempt to stave off an Iranian attack, Schanzer warned.

“Every day that Israel waits, we see Hezbollah provocations grow,” he said.

The deployment of aircraft carriers is meant to “enable Israel to enter the Gaza Strip and remove an Iranian asset from the chessboard, while Iran is forced to simply

watch,” he said.

However, extending the crisis gives more time for mistakes to be made, with potential to spark a broader conflagration.

“I fear the U.S. may be trying to engineer too much of this rather than just simply give Israelis the time and space they need to take Hamas off the board while providing that deterrence to the Iranians,” Schanzer said. “That is the simplest and easiest outcome — and that’s not easy at all.”

In contrast, Oren took issue with the Biden administration seeking to avoid the opening of a northern front against Israel.

“Hamas is trapped and isn’t going anywhere,” he said. “Hezbollah is 50 times stronger and more experienced in fighting, and presents a strategic threat; 150,000 rockets are an intolerable threat for any nation.

“Now that we have 350,000 reservists called up and two aircraft carriers in the region, let’s deal with Hezbollah,” Oren argued.

The former ambassador said that the IDF thinks it can deter Hezbollah by destroying Hamas, and that if Hezbollah enters the fray first and then Israel responds, the Jewish state will have the moral high ground.

“I question this whole concept. Remember what happened in 1973 when we wanted the moral high ground?” Oren said, referring to the thousands of IDF soldiers killed in the Yom Kippur War.

Oren also said Israel will “pay a price” by being more dependent on the U.S. for its security than in the past.

Oren recounted that Israel was once referred to as America’s largest aircraft carrier in the Middle East.

“If we’re the aircraft carrier, why do we need two others?” he asked. But at the same time, “I don’t hear anyone saying, ‘We don’t need your aircraft carriers; we’re fine.’”

“We had neither an effective government nor did our military secure our borders,” he lamented. “It’s unpleasant for a sovereign state to rely so heavily on the U.S. We always prided ourselves on being able to defend ourselves, by ourselves. It’s not an easy moment.”

Still, Oren called the American embrace of Israel a “net positive...The psychological impact is very important not only for us, but also for our enemies.”

Schanzer said that there “may be Israeli reliance, but they appear dedicated to working together, which I think generally is a positive sign.”

He praised the “unambiguous message being delivered to the entire Arab world, Iran and Turkey...that as Israel goes through

this crisis, America has Israel's back.”

“It's heartening to see the cooperation,” he stated.

But the scale of that cooperation does not come without risks.

“I think the Israelis are giving the U.S. wide latitude right now, but this assumes the

U.S. knows what it's doing. We're definitely in uncharted territory here. There has never been a crisis like this in 50 years in the Middle East, where the entire region is this close to full-blown conflagration,” Schanzer said. ♦

OCTOBER 18, 2023

In show of unity, Jewish institutions rally behind Israel and condemn anti-Zionist rhetoric

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: ‘I usually urge us to sit with the complexity and with nuances but some moments give you clarity.’

By Gabby Deutch, Haley Cohen

Less than a week after a Shabbat that saw the most deadly massacre of Jews in a single day since the Holocaust, another Shabbat came — and with it, some of the largest crowds at American synagogues since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Vigils and pro-Israel protests around the country have garnered thousands of attendees, with no sign of the numbers letting up as the war between Israel and Hamas enters a second week.

“I usually urge us to sit with the complexity and with nuances but some moments give you clarity,” Rabbi Angela Buchdahl told a packed sanctuary at Manhattan's Central Synagogue last Friday.

The outpouring of grief and mourning with Israel in the week and a half since the Hamas terrorist attacks that killed more than 1,400 Israelis represents a new moment in American Jewish history, community leaders and scholars of Jewish history tell *Jewish Insider*. The loudest anti-Zionist voices have been pushed further to the margins while American Jews across the religious and political spectrums have joined together in a unified show of solidarity.

“The horror of October 7 was so extensive that it has brought together so many different elements within the Jewish community in a way I've not seen in my entire professional life,” said Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs

and a former J Street staffer.

Jewish federations in communities across America have raised hundreds of millions of dollars to support relief efforts in Israel, and the American nonprofits supporting the Israel Defense Forces and the Magen David Adom ambulance corps have been overwhelmed by support from people who want to help Israel in the face of so much devastation. Even the most politically conservative Jewish leaders have joined with more liberal Jews to offer words of praise for President Joe Biden's handling of the situation.

“I think the Jewish community has been much more wall-to-wall than I've ever seen around this, and not just in the sense of the political and behavioral responses, but in the emotional response, which is, in many ways, very inspiring,” said Yehuda Kurtzer, the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. “The Jewish people is in mourning, and the geography is not a huge factor in terms of that mourning.”

As Jewish communities focus on the unprecedented brutality of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, the feeling of solidarity surpasses political divides.

“On another day, let's talk about the occupation and oppression. But right now, while people are being murdered and kidnapped? No,” said Rabbi Rachel Timoner, the senior rabbi at Congregation

Beth Elohim, a progressive synagogue in Brooklyn. “We have to talk about how any country has the right to defend itself against terrorism. Any country has the right to bring its hostages home. It's not right to ask Israel to refrain from military action when 200 of its innocent people are currently being held in likely extremely terrifying, possibly torturous conditions.”

For much of this year, liberal congregations like Congregation Beth Elohim have been extraordinarily engaged on Israel — but from a more critical standpoint, in response to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government and his support for controversial judicial reform measures viewed by many on the left as weakening Israeli democracy. Now, just a month after many rabbis touched on the issue in their High Holy Days sermons, the focus has shifted.

“In the [United] States, the UnXeptable movement, which was the diaspora version of the [anti-judicial reform] protest movement, has completely repurposed itself to become a platform for supporting Israel,” said David Myers, the director of UCLA's Luskin Center for History and Policy and a past board president of New Israel Fund, a liberal Israeli civil society organization.

Issues “which may have been important,” such as judicial reform, “are now of relative

unimportance compared to the grief we are feeling and the need to respond with strong solidarity with Israel,” said Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the Rabbinical Assembly and of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Blumenthal left for Israel on Tuesday with a delegation through the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary, many of whom were actively involved in anti-judicial reform protests, are now figuring out how to grapple with the war in the context of their classes and their other activism.

“Many students and faculty have taken part in rallies, both [in New York] and when they have found themselves in Israel,” Shuly Rubin Schwartz, chancellor of the preeminent Conservative rabbinical school, told JI. “But you can hold more than one thought in your heart at the same time. They, like I, can understand the flaws of Israel that need to be addressed and love it with all my heart. I’m heartbroken when Israelis are massacred. I don’t see one as contradicting the other, and that’s what a lot of the conversations involve here.”

Many Jews on the political left have grappled over the past week and a half with comments coming from some progressives once seen as allies who are now blaming Israel for the attack, describing Hamas’ terrorism as a valid response to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians.

“We’re only seen as the perpetrator and never the victim, even when we’re in the moment of being victimized,” said Timoner. “People who are so ready to blame us – it’s stunning.”

Most of the responses attacking Israel have not come from within the mainstream Jewish community, but a small but vocal minority professing to speak for American Jews — primarily espoused by the far-left groups Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow — have asserted that Israel provoked the attack and that Israel is not blameless in the deaths of the 1,400 Israelis.

“It seemed to me that this represented a move further to the left on IfNotNow’s part,” said Myers, who called the anti-Zionist Jewish groups “outliers” in their response to the Hamas attacks.

“I have felt very — I don’t know, for lack

of a better word, triggered — by the boldness of standing up in the midst of this colossal tragedy and changing the plotline. And that’s what it feels like. It’s like a changing of the plotline from collective grief and Israel’s necessity and obligation to not just respond, but to defend itself,” said Kurtzer. “There’s a refusal to engage with any measure of humility about what’s different as a result of this mass slaughter.”

Blumenthal said that the anti-Zionist groups are “morally tone-deaf.”

“I don’t believe they represent any real, mainstream voice in the community. They have always been a fringe and now they are most definitely a fringe,” he said.

Beyond the political left, many in the Jewish community are disappointed in what they perceive as a lack of support for Jews by friends, in workplaces and on college campuses. Universities in particular are facing scrutiny for issuing tepid statements in the face of both the attacks in Israel and pro-Palestine rallies that have echoed Hamas talking points. This, too, brings Jewish Americans closer to each other.

“There’s a deep disillusionment of some Jews with friends who haven’t provided any level of comfort to Jews at a time of personal mourning, even leaving political questions and political support aside,” said Geoffrey Levin, a Middle East studies professor at Emory University.

“I really think that this crisis is going to reshape a generation of Jewish politics,” added Levin. “The feelings of this moment, whether they’re positive feelings of feeling hugged by the community, or more negative feelings of just having others around them not understand, it’s going to shape Jewish politics.”

Michael Koplow, chief policy officer at the Israel Policy Forum, said he suspects that “after the immediate crisis is over, if the current government remains in power and pursues some of the same policy direction that it was before, we will start to see American Jews go back to their pre-October 7 positions.”

“But a lot of it will depend on how long the fighting continues, whether another front opens up and to what extent Israelis suffer more death than they already have. All of that will determine what happens next,” he said.

In recent days, Israel has ramped up its attacks in Gaza in the hopes of eliminating Hamas’ leadership. A ground offensive in Gaza appears imminent. Already, the deaths of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza has sparked some on the left to decry Israel’s response as “genocide.”

“If there’s a ground incursion, there will be more civilian deaths. There will be images on every newspaper’s front page or every news site’s website. That will, for many people, tip the balance away from Israel. [But] that doesn’t mean that Israel doesn’t have moral justification to try and uproot and eliminate the threat that Hamas poses, which is existential,” said Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism.

For now, rabbis continue to provide comfort to an American Jewish community that is deeply traumatized. At least 30 American citizens were killed in last week’s attack. At least 10 more are missing and believed to have been taken hostage by Hamas. Many more American Jews have spent the past week and a half texting and calling Israeli friends and relatives to check in.

“Nobody’s OK. That’s the truth: Nobody’s OK,” said Kurtzer, who is in Jerusalem.

Last Shabbat, the global Jewish community began its annual rereading of the Torah after the usually joyous holiday of Simchat Torah, this year marred by the Hamas attack. *Bereshit*, “In the beginning,” the Bible begins.

Buchdahl, the rabbi at Manhattan’s Central Synagogue, reflected on the weekly *parsha* in her Friday sermon.

“In the beginning, when God created light, God separated the light from the dark,” Buchdahl said in a sermon that has as of Tuesday been viewed more than 63,000 times on YouTube. “Today Israel is forced into a new *Bereshit*, a new world for Israel, and make no mistake: It will never be the same there again. The light was separated from the dark. There is no gray area here.” After she finished speaking, hundreds of American Jews stood up to sing “*Hatikvah*” together, their arms around one another.

Gabby Deutch is Jewish Insider’s Washington correspondent; Haley Cohen is eJewishPhilanthropy’s news reporter. ♦

Israel's war cabinet tells Biden that ground invasion of Gaza is imminent

Biden: 'Justice must be done, but I caution this: While you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it.'

By Lahav Harkov, Gabby Deutch

Israel's war cabinet made it clear to President Joe Biden that a ground incursion into Gaza is looming, as he took part in a meeting with Israeli ministers at the Defense Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv on Wednesday.

Netanyahu and the Israeli ministers told Biden that a ground maneuver could not be avoided and that there will be a long war, a source in the meeting told *Jewish Insider*, confirming reporting in the Hebrew media. Some of the ministers called this war "existential."

If Israel's victory over Hamas is not total, its strategic standing in the Middle East and deterrence against its enemies will be significantly damaged, the Israeli source said. Ministers also argued that Saudi Arabia may no longer want to normalize relations with Israel if the Jewish state appears weak.

In Biden's meeting with the war cabinet, he asked Israel to limit the war to Gaza and told the ministers to consider what will happen in Gaza if Hamas is fully dismantled.

Publicly, Biden's message of support was steadfast. In a speech before he departed Tel Aviv, the president said he came to Israel with "a single message: You're not alone." Biden is slated to address the American public about his administration's response to Hamas' terrorism against Israel — and Russia's war in Ukraine — in a primetime speech on Thursday evening.

In his 15-minute address in Israel, Biden described Washington's enduring commitment to Israel's security and spoke soberly of the grief that the survivors of the Hamas massacre face, "staring at an empty chair, sitting shiva, the first Sabbath without them."

Oct. 7 was the deadliest day for the global Jewish community since the Holocaust,

Biden noted.

"It has brought to the surface painful memories and scars left by millennia of antisemitism and the genocide of the Jewish people," Biden said in Tel Aviv. "The world watched then. It knew. And it did nothing. We will not stand by and do nothing again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever."

Biden also relayed a demand shared by the U.S. and Israel: that the Red Cross must be allowed to visit the hostages in Gaza.

The wartime cabinet and American delegation also discussed the possibility of sending humanitarian aid to Gaza. The Israeli Prime Minister's Office announced that it will not allow any such assistance to enter the Gaza Strip from Israel so long as the hostages are not returned.

However, Israel will not prevent Egypt from allowing aid — limited to food, water and medicine for civilians evacuating to southern Gaza — into the enclave. Israel will stop any aid from reaching Hamas, the PMO stated.

Up to 20 trucks of humanitarian assistance will now enter Gaza daily through the Rafah gate via Egypt, according to an agreement Biden reached with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. "He stepped up, as did Bibi," Biden said of Sisi in a conversation with reporters on Wednesday night on Air Force One. Netanyahu has not pushed back on Washington's request for greater humanitarian assistance to Gaza, Biden added.

"If Hamas confiscates them or doesn't let it get through," Biden continued, "then it's going to end."

Biden announced on Wednesday that Washington will provide \$100 million in humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The funding will

"support more than one million displaced and conflict-affected Palestinians, including emergency needs in Gaza," Biden said.

The U.S. wants southern Gaza to be a humanitarian safe zone, the source in the war cabinet meeting said — something that Israel would be willing to allow, National Security Council Director Tzachi Hanegbi said ahead of Biden's visit.

Biden issued a plea for Israel to consider the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, even as he condemned Hamas for using "innocent families in Gaza as human shields, putting their command centers and their weapons, communications tunnels, in residential areas."

"You are a Jewish state. But you're also a democracy. Like the United States, you don't live by the rules of terrorists. You live by the rule of law," Biden continued. "What sets us apart from the terrorists is we believe in the fundamental dignity of every human life: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, Jew, Muslim, Christian, everyone. You can't give up what makes you who you are. If you give that up, then the terrorists win, and we can never let them win."

He urged Israel not to be overcome by a desire for vengeance in the way some in America were after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"Justice must be done, but I caution this: While you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it. After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes."

Israel's war cabinet was established last week when Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, who leads the National Unity party, reached an agreement to establish an emergency unity government. The third member of the war cabinet is Israeli Defense Minister Yoav

Gallant, while Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, former IDF Chief of Staff Minister Gadi Eisenkot are observers.

Also in the meeting were Hanegbi, MK Aryeh Deri, the prime minister's chief of staff, Tzachi Braverman; Military Secretary Maj.-Gen. Avi Gil and Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Mike Herzog. On the American side were Biden, Secretary of State Tony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk and Stephanie Hallett,

Ahead of the cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said that "this will be a different kind of war because Hamas is a different kind of enemy."

"Every day, they perpetrate a double war crime: targeting our civilians while hiding behind their civilians, embedding themselves in the civilian population, and using them as human shields," the prime minister stated.

The explosion in the Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza caused by a rocket misfired by Palestinian terrorists on Tuesday night is an example of such a war crime, Netanyahu said.

"The entire world was rightfully outraged but this outrage should be directed not at Israel but at the terrorists," he said.

Many international media outlets quickly, and mistakenly, reported that the hospital had been hit by an Israeli rocket. Israeli military and intelligence officials have since concluded that the explosion was caused by an Islamic Jihad rocket misfire. The U.S. National Security Council on Wednesday agreed that Israel was not responsible for the attack.

"It's not the first time Hamas has launched something that didn't function very well. So I don't know all the details but I do know the people at the Defense Department who I respect and the intelligence community that I respect [say it] is highly improbable that Israel did that," Biden said Wednesday night on his way back to Washington.

"If you notice," he added, "I didn't say it at first. I didn't — I wanted to make sure that I knew."

Netanyahu thanked Biden for "the depth and breadth of cooperation that we have had since the beginning of this war, a level of cooperation that is truly unprecedented

in the history of the great alliance between our two nations."

Biden met with several Israelis directly impacted by the Hamas attack on Oct. 7.

"I've admired you all, this country, for so long," he told the group of 14 Israeli citizens. "I'm convinced that the more people know your responses to what's happening as opposed to just what war and peace is about, the more they're going to be inclined to embrace Israel."

Among the attendees of the meeting with Biden was Rachel Edri, who has become famous in Israel for successfully stalling Hamas terrorists in her home by offering them cookies and other food until her police officer son, Evyatar Edri, who also attended the meeting with the president, could free his parents together with a SWAT team.

Rachel Edri told Israeli media after the meeting that Biden "shook everyone's hand, and when he reached me, he kissed me on the head. I was very emotional. He said that he will help us eliminate Hamas. I told him that our police officers are the best; they saved me." ♦

OCTOBER 19, 2023

National Council of Jewish Women leads push to secure release of hostages taken by Hamas

Female leaders, prominent figures urge human rights groups and international governments to demand immediate release of captives held in Gaza

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

They range from infants to Holocaust survivors. At least 203 people, mostly civilians, were abducted from Israel during the Oct. 7 terror attacks by Hamas and are being held captive in Gaza.

A diverse group of women leaders, including celebrities, politicians and activists, jointly signed a letter, spearheaded by the National Council of Jewish Women, urging human rights groups and international governments to demand

immediate release of the hostages.

Sheila Katz, CEO of NCJW, pointed to the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim* — freeing the captive. "Releasing hostages is considered to be the greatest mitzvah," Katz told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "It's directly related to ongoing responsibility to work for justice and surpasses many other critical mitzvot. It's the right thing to do and Jewish thing to do."

Katz noted that when drafting the letter, she consulted directly with parents, siblings and spouses of hostages. "Because we've been involving the families there is

a lot of trust in the process," she said. The letter received over 5,000 signatures in its first 24 hours. Katz said the letter has been spreading through the "power of social media and word of mouth, [especially on] WhatsApp groups," adding that the "whole campaign from inception to launch was 24 hours."

In addition to calling for the hostages' release, the letter also demands that until then, the captives receive medical treatment and that Hamas refrain from withholding or mutilating the bodies of the people that it murdered.

"International humanitarian law requires that Hamas immediately provide all necessary means to identify those being held hostage, to allow for medical treatment, not to engage in their torture and ill-treatment, and to respect the dignity of remains by not desecrating bodies and returning them for burial," the letter continues. "We demand that these norms be respected, and stress that all parties to armed conflict must comply with international law."

Ricarda Louk, whose 22-year-old daughter is believed to have been seriously injured and abducted from the NOVA music festival, where Hamas murdered at least 260 people, called on the international community to force Hamas to get the hostages medical care.

"Our daughter, Shani-Nicole, has built her life around peace, art and music. She helped organize the [NOVA] music festival to bring people together through the universal language of music and dance," she said in a statement. "Hamas terrorists invaded the festival, killed hundreds and took many, including our Shani, hostage. She was documented in a horrifying video lying unconscious and naked in a truck. We have information that she is now suffering from a severe head injury and is in dire need of medical care. We demand that world leaders and humanitarian organizations intervene now to ensure Shani and all hostages receive the aid they so desperately need."

"We're also doing this as women," Katz continued. "We care about these families.

This should be something everyone feels comfortable signing on to."

"We are women leaders, activists, and experts. We are feminists. We are mothers, grandmothers and sisters," the letter read. "We have dedicated our professional and personal lives to advocate for human rights. We call for the immediate release of all women and children being held hostage by Hamas. Their continued captivity is a standing violation of international humanitarian law and demands an international response. We urge all governments, international organizations, and civil society groups to condemn these crimes and take action to help secure the release of hostages. We urge the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNICEF, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others, to do everything within their power to get much-needed aid to hostages."

Celebrity signatories, Jewish and non-Jewish, range from Israeli movie star Gal Gadot to country music singer Maren Morris.

"As a Jewish Israeli woman who cares deeply about my homeland, my heart breaks for the hostages and their families," Gadot said in a statement. "This is a humanitarian crisis and we need to raise our voices to demand their safe release and ongoing medical care."

Other signatories include Stacey Bendet Eisner, founder of the clothing company Alice + Olivia; philanthropist Stacy Schusterman; Israeli Judge Dorit Beinisch,

former president of the Israeli Supreme Court; and professor Yuli Tamir, former chairperson of the Israeli Human Rights Association and former Israeli minister of education and of immigration.

On Monday, Hamas released the first clip of one of the hostages, which the Israel Defense Forces called "psychological terror." The short video shows Mia Schem, 21, also abducted from the NOVA festival.

Elected officials and family members of hostages gathered outside the United Nations on Wednesday, some holding photos of the captives, demanding that their release be prioritized.

In a separate letter last week, more than 110 Jewish organizations from more than 40 countries, including the American Jewish Committee and Jewish Federations of North America, urged the United Nations and governments worldwide to take immediate action to secure the release of the hostages.

Approximately 20 American citizens remain unaccounted for. It is unclear how many of those were abducted by Hamas. President Joe Biden visited Israel on Wednesday, where he met with the families of the missing and of those murdered by Hamas. Last week, Biden pledged the full force of his administration's commitment to rescuing hostages. "We're working on every aspect of the hostage crisis in Israel," he said in a statement, adding that if he provided detail about what steps the administration was taking, "I wouldn't be able to get them home." ♦

OCTOBER 13, 2023

Heroism under fire: The neighbors who saved their town – and another one

Yonatan Werner recounts the battle to stop Hamas terrorists from entering his and a neighboring moshav; a Bedouin man who rescued 30 people escaping the Nova music festival - and more

By Lahav Harkov

When Yonatan Werner was awakened at 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, he thought it was another day of rocket fire in the Gaza periphery. He didn't know that it would be

the deadliest day in Israel's history, or that he would be one of its heroes, helping to save his neighbors and residents in the next town over.

Amid the horror of Hamas' murder and

mutilation of scores of Israelis, from babies to the elderly, there have been stories of remarkable heroism.

Werner lives in Shlomit, a tiny, Orthodox agricultural village established in 2011 just

south of Gaza by the Egyptian border, and is a member of the village's council. He also volunteers for its security team, which does patrols and is the first line of defense until the police or army arrive.

Speaking to *Jewish Insider* while at a shooting range near Israel's northern border, where he is on reserve duty, Werner recounted that after the heavy rocket fire at 6:30 on Saturday, "we didn't understand what was happening. It went quiet after 20 minutes, and I left the house to go to the head of the emergency staff, who lived right across from me."

"When I went out, I smelled gunpowder and heard shooting all around, so I realized this was something bigger, some kind of infiltration," Werner recounted. "We called the whole security team together."

Meanwhile, the head of security, Benny Meshulam, heard on his walkie-talkie — to which his counterparts in all the adjacent *moshavim* are connected — that terrorists had entered the nearby town of Prigan.

"We realized we needed help, and the entire team went there; it's about five minutes away," Werner recalled.

The gun-toting security team found Hamas terrorists at the house closest to the village's gate and were able to fight them off. The seven-member team from Shlomit made up most of the force combating 10 Hamas terrorists.

"For over an hour, we battled the terrorists at the gate [of Prigan], because we knew that if they got in, they would kill everyone," Werner said.

"We thought the army would come, but time kept passing and they did not arrive. At first, two [of our] people were injured, one moderately and one very badly, and then two more, another one very badly," Werner said. "After an hour of battle, the terrorists understood they couldn't pass us, and they ran away."

"By standing strong, we saved Prigan from a terrible massacre. The devastation we saw in Kfar Azza and Beeri — if we didn't get to Prigan, it would have happened there," he said.

Werner pointed out that his moshav, Shlomit, is religious, while Prigan is not: "In these moments, we are brothers and we want to save our brothers in trouble; there was no question."

Two residents of Shlomit — Aviad Cohen and Reuven Sasportas — were killed in the battle with the terrorists, and another neighbor, Uriel Bibi, was murdered by terrorists at an intersection on the drive to help them. A fourth man at another moshav 50 minutes away heard about the battle and drove to save his friends, but was killed at the same intersection as Bibi.

"In Shlomit, we have four widows and 15 orphans, all in one street," Werner said.

At the same time, there was a birth. A woman in Shlomit went into labor on Saturday morning, was evacuated by helicopter and gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Werner said, calling it "surreal."

Werner left his wife with Cohen's widow, and his children at their aunt's, and went to do his reserve duty. Most of the residents of Shlomit were evacuated to Kfar Etzion, near Jerusalem.

"We are all going back to Shlomit," he said. "There is no doubt. We will fight until we win. The morale in reserves is strong, as well; we know we will do everything it takes to win."

"The Jewish people have no other home in the world than Israel," he added.

One lesser-known story is that of Yussef Alzianda of Rahat, a Bedouin town in the Negev that is often hit by Hamas rockets.

Alzianda, a van driver, had been hired to bring nine people to the Nova rave, a music festival in an open field in the town of Re'im at which 260 Israelis were killed in a Hamas rampage. He told the Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, which tweeted out his story, that "at 6:30 I got a message that there was a rocket siren and I should come quickly to pick up [the passengers]."

"When I arrived, the scene was already hot. There were gunshots overhead and people running away and screaming," Alzianda said.

He saw an injured woman running towards him screaming for help.

"It was terrible; I never saw anything like it and I wouldn't wish it upon anyone to see it," he said. "What was most important was to save lives, and I had to use all of my courage. I'm afraid to sleep now, so the images don't come back to me."

Alzianda's van is a 14-seater, but he loaded 30 people in it and drove across

fields to the nearest police station in Kibbutz Tze'elim, where the injured were treated.

"I am a Bedouin, but I am first of all a human being and a citizen of Israel," Alzianda said. "I would never differentiate between people. We are all human beings."

Amit Hadar, one of the passengers, wrote on Facebook that "the only reason we got out of there was Yussef, an Arab Bedouin from the south. Even when the terrorists shot at us from every direction, he didn't drive away and leave us alone. He waited, collected, and rescued everyone he could on the way."

"The man is larger than life and we will always owe him," Hadar wrote, and recommended that, in more peaceful times, people hire Alzianda as a driver.

Werner and his neighbors in Shlomit were only some of the volunteer security teams that saved their whole town.

Another is Inbal Liberman, the first woman to lead a security team in the Gaza periphery, who fought off the terrorists in Kibbutz Nir Am, close to northern Gaza.

Liberman, 25, has refused to grant interviews, but other members of the kibbutz spread her story online.

When the entire kibbutz heard sirens and entered shelters at 6:30 a.m., Liberman heard unusual sounds. There was a power outage because of the rockets, and she instructed her security team not to turn the electricity back on, so that the gate to the kibbutz would remain locked.

Then she gathered the rest of the security team and had them take positions with guns. She and the other 11 members waited. When the terrorists approached, they reportedly killed two and injured one, according to *Haaretz*, though the numbers were inflated on social media.

Liberman's father told *Haaretz* that he brought her a sandwich in the middle of the battle.

Eventually, IDF soldiers arrived to back up Liberman's team. Everyone who was in Kibbutz Nir Am that morning survived.

On her own Instagram, she wrote: "I was not a hero and I was not there alone. I am still digesting everything that I am going through, therefore I am not telling the real story, but I promise you will hear from me! There are still so many people in the field fighting for their lives." ♦

Maccabi Ra'anana gets lift from U.S. crowd

Before tipoff, those gathered observed a moment of silence, after which Israeli singer and actress Noa Kirel gave an emotional performance of "Hatikva," Israel's national anthem

By **Tori Bergel**

When the Maccabi Ra'anana basketball team landed in New York City two weeks ago to kick off its preseason exhibition tour across the U.S., all minds were on Israel; making their country proud, representing the skill of Israeli basketball, improving on their game and maybe even recruiting a few American players to join the league.

Eight days later, as the team readied to play the Brooklyn Nets in their first of three NBA matchups, their minds were still on Israel; this time on the family, friends and neighbors who had been killed, taken hostage or otherwise terrorized since Hamas' plunged the country into war on Oct. 7 with an attack deadlier than Israel had seen in its 75-year history.

Under normal circumstances, the trip was to serve as a sort of diplomatic excursion, giving American audiences the chance to see how far Israeli basketball has come while also allowing the Maccabi players to test themselves against NBA-caliber talent. But it was transformed into a mixed bag of emotions for the Israeli team, whose players felt split between worlds; still determined to do what they set out to, yet longing to be with their loved ones.

"If I can just describe it in the best way, it's [like] your body [is] in the States and your mind and your heart is in Israel," head coach Yehu Orland told *Jewish Insider* ahead of last Thursday's game against the Nets. "The mood is really, really sad and tough. It's hard to focus on basketball at [the] moment, but we are representatives of Israel also, not only our club, and we're going to do the best out of it."

No one in Israel has been left untouched by the war, including those with Maccabi Ra'anana, some of whom had been called up as reservists. One of Orland's close friends, Eli Ginsberg, was among those killed in the

days before the game, during which he wore a shirt that read "R.I.P. Eli. Forever in my Heart."

Earlier in the month, the team's chairman, Dror Grabinsky, was anticipating a decent reception come Oct. 12.

"There's gonna be a lot of crowds, a lot of Jewish crowds, Israeli crowds, so it's going to be [an] honor for us to play in front of all these people," Grabinsky told *J.I.* Speaking before the attacks happened, he couldn't have sensed what a comfort the assemblage would turn out to be.

Leaving the locker room last Thursday evening at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, the team was met by a sea of supporters. Fans brandished Israeli flags and "New York Supports Israel" signs were passed out by staffers from the American Jewish Committee. Sections of the arena had also been purchased by donors so that as many seats as possible would be filled by Jewish fans.

Before tipoff, those gathered observed a moment of silence, after which Israeli singer and actress Noa Kirel gave an emotional performance of "Hatikva," Israel's national anthem. Even after the buzzer sounded, as the game commenced in earnest, Israeli music blared from the loudspeakers between every play.

"It was a nice change of pace from the vigils and the rallies that we've been going to for a day or two before, and it was a good change of energy. It was good to support in other ways," said Nadiv Panitch, who, along with some friends, felt it important to be in attendance.

At first, the idea of taking in a basketball game raised a "moral question" to Panitch, who has family in Israel and who was unsure about going to such a fun and recreational event while the situation abroad was so dire. Once the players decided to continue with

the game, however, he saw it as a way to "show that we can't let terror and fear stop us from living our lives."

Maccabi Ra'anana lost in the end, 135-103, but the scoreboard seemed of little consequence. Much of the team waited around afterwards, waving to the crowd and thanking those closest to the court for their support. Outside, a large group of fans formed a circle at the entrance to Barclays Center. Together, arm in arm, they sang "Am Yisrael Chai" and "Hatikva" among others, wearing the Israeli flag and dancing, creating an impromptu vigil for Israel.

"There were people with *tzitzit* and *payes*, then on the other side of the circle were young girls in crop tops and pants, just like clearly very different kinds of Jews and very different kinds of ideologies and *halachic* practice coming together to be unified by a shared tragedy," Sara Heckelman told *J.I.* "All of us were quenching this kind of thirst for community and comfort, and I think we were all just really happy to be there, supporting Israel."

Maccabi Ra'anana's final game was played Tuesday night against the Minnesota Timberwolves — before which they lost to the Cleveland Cavaliers on Monday — but it was that first crowd at Barclays Center that provided the team with a much-needed emotional lift.

"The only support that you can get now that you're overseas is with each other," Orland said, "so we are going to do our best to stay together all the time, as much as we can, and support each other." ♦

Eileen Filler-Corn announces campaign for open House seat in Northern Virginia

The former Virginia House Speaker plans on centering the Democratic primary campaign on her stalwart support for Israel

By Matthew Kassel

Eileen Filler-Corn, the first woman and first Jewish speaker of Virginia's House of Delegates, is launching a new campaign for a competitive open congressional seat in Northern Virginia, she announced in an exclusive interview with *Jewish Insider*.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this is the right time for me to step up," Filler-Corn, a Democrat, said on Tuesday. "I look at what is going on in Washington, D.C., or I should say what's not going on. The chaos. The MAGA Republicans. The perception of us in the eyes of the world. How this affects our economy, our allies, just everything. It became clear to me that Congress needs help."

The 59-year-old state legislator, who will formally declare her candidacy today, is centering her campaign launch around her Jewish faith and unwavering support for Israel in the wake of Hamas' terrorist attacks.

"My connection to Judaism, my connection to the State of Israel, to the security of Israel, has always been part of who I am," she told *JL*. "I am a very proud American Jew. I'm proud of my connection to Israel. I always speak out about my experiences in Israel and the importance of having a strong Israel-U.S. relationship, but also the importance of standing up to terrorism and against Hamas."

The recent atrocities "have just been devastating," said Filler-Corn, who has friends and family in Israel and spent a gap year before college living near the Israeli coastal city of Ashkelon, which has been targeted by Hamas rockets from Gaza.

Meanwhile, the reactions from some lawmakers who have since downplayed the attacks, she said, have only strengthened her

commitment to upholding support for Israel and its "right to defend itself" in the House. "For all these reasons, I am looking forward to running and soon serving in Congress."

Her focus on Israel is the most high-profile demonstration of how Middle East policy is now shaping several House races across the country. In Pittsburgh, for instance, Bhavini Patel, a new challenger to Rep. Summer Lee (D-PA), is drawing sharp contrasts on Israel, while in Minneapolis, Don Samuels, a former city councilman, is preparing to announce a rematch against Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), whose fierce criticism of Israel he plans to highlight during the primary.

But Filler-Corn's candidacy represents a more crystallized version of that trend, owing to her deep personal commitment to Jewish causes, which she has frequently highlighted as an elected official.

The Democratic lawmaker has long been actively involved in organized Jewish life and currently serves as a board director with the American Jewish Committee. "I've always been guided by the concept of *tikkun olam* and focused on repairing the world," she explained. "Doing what's right, helping those most vulnerable, rooting out evil and discrimination."

"That goes for all people. We have seen, however, that there has been a stark increase in antisemitic activity over the years, and it's a concern again right now," said Filler-Corn, who faced anti-Jewish harassment during her speakership. "There are literally people in federal prison for attempting to kill me when I was speaker, as a Jew."

Filler-Corn is the first Democrat to declare intention to run for the seat now held by Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-VA), who said last month that she would not seek a

fourth term after being diagnosed with a rare and incurable neurological disorder. Filler-Corn, who called Wexton a "good friend" and "wonderful legislator," said that she was "devastated" for the 55-year-old congresswoman. "It's just horrific."

Filler-Corn is a prodigious fundraiser and well-known to voters in Virginia's 10th Congressional District, centered in the Northern Virginia suburb of Loudoun County. Filler-Corn has represented a state legislative district in Fairfax County during her time in the state legislature.

Until recently, Filler-Corn, who announced last March that she would not seek reelection to the state legislature, had been weighing a bid for governor in the 2025 election. But the veteran Democrat, who was narrowly ousted as House minority leader after her party lost control of the chamber last cycle, said her thinking had changed amid what she viewed as increasing dysfunction in Washington — and a firm belief that she could advance legislation by working across the aisle. "I'm confident I've got the record of accomplishment," she said.

As the conflict in Israel has unfolded in recent days, Filler-Corn indicated that she is now even more motivated to seek federal office — a perch that will allow her to take a direct role in shaping foreign policy. "Do I think it will continue to resonate and continue to be an issue?" she said of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas. "I absolutely do."

The Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, during which more than 1,400 Israelis were murdered, "is a moment in time for all of us, and things are never going to be the same again," Filler-Corn vowed. "I think everybody is watching and listening and nervous and anxious about what this means."

Filler-Corn said there are “several different steps” she would “like to see” lawmakers take, including continued demands that Hamas release the hostages it is holding in Gaza. “I think all members of Congress should be speaking out about that.”

While she voiced appreciation for President Joe Biden’s strong solidarity with Israel, Filler-Corn said she has watched with dismay as a handful of left-wing House members have equivocated over the attacks or renewed calls for conditioning military aid to Israel, among other things.

“For all of us who are just reeling in pain from this, I think the silence has been deafening,” she said. “Hamas is a terrorist organization whose charter seeks the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people,” she added. “That every member of Congress

has not openly come out against terrorism and against the terrorist attack against Israel and the Jewish people is obviously disturbing and needs to be called out.”

Filler-Corn dismissed calls for de-escalation amid Israel’s counteroffensive in Gaza, accusing Hamas of using “innocent civilians” as “human shields,” which she described as “horrifying” to watch. “I think everyone wishes that there would be less violence and that people would be able to be safe and free,” she told JI. “But we have to recognize the reality, and taking into consideration the proximity and the size, Hamas is a terrorist organization that needs to be stopped.”

“It’s really hard, I think, for people who haven’t been there to understand,” said Filler-Corn, who recalled seeing Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system “in action”

during a visit to the Jewish state just a couple of months ago. “When that works, there are also Palestinians who work in Israel who are protected. It’s just essential to continue with unconditional support for Israel.”

As a state legislator, Filler-Corn worked to pass resolutions condemning the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and commemorating Israel’s 65th anniversary.

In the interview with JI on Tuesday, she touted her record on voting rights, gun violence prevention and supporting abortion access — all issues she attributed to the Jewish values she hopes will now guide her to the House in next year’s election.

“I’m proud of who I am,” Filler-Corn said. “I’m proud of my support for Israel and I’m proud of my Jewish upbringing and identity. I’m looking forward to bringing all of this to my campaign and then to Congress.” ♦

OCTOBER 16, 2023

Abu Dhabi sets date for driverless race on Formula 1 track as autonomous ambitions take shape

Visitors to the Gitex technology conference in Dubai can get a sneak peek of the racing car

By Kelsey Warner

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Abu Dhabi has set a date for driverless racing on its Formula One track, aimed at bringing a new spectator sport to the capital while advancing autonomous and robotics systems.

The first race for the Abu Dhabi Autonomous Racing League is scheduled for April 28, 2024, with 10 competitors from universities and research teams around the world vying for a prize pool up to \$2.25 million.

Also known as self-driving racing, the sport involves competition among vehicles that are controlled by a computer.

“By bringing together scientists, developers, and coding gurus from around the world within an extreme sports arena, we are actively stress-testing capabilities on the racetracks, for safety on our roads,” Faisal Al Bannai, secretary general of the

Advanced Technology Research Council, which is overseeing the league, according to a statement released today.

The news comes within a day of the Abu Dhabi government announcing a new research and policy development platform to spur the UAE’s autonomous vehicle industry.

The business cluster, headquartered in Masdar City, will provide global players with access to testing facilities.

The Abu Dhabi Investment Office, the local business development arm of the capital’s government, expects the new campus to create up to 50,000 jobs and contribute at least \$24.5 billion to the UAE economy.

China’s WeRide, which is already operating trials for driverless cars on Abu Dhabi roads, will establish its Middle East headquarters at the Masdar City location. Marakeb Technologies, a UAE-based

maker of maritime unmanned systems will develop marine technologies, and Joby Aviation, California-based company developing electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) aircraft will “participate” in the project.

Abu Dhabi’s dedicated AI research university Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI), its applied research campus Technology Innovation Institute, research university Khalifa University and its startup ecosystem Hub71 are also involved.

“The announcements of involvement from leading companies developing autonomous systems technologies lend weight to the plans announced for Abu Dhabi’s new Smart and Autonomous Vehicle Industries cluster, which envisions hardware and software R&D labs, small workshops, 3D-printing and simulation facilities,” Carrington Malin, a technology

consultant based in Dubai, wrote on LinkedIn.

At the Formula One track on Abu Dhabi's Yas Island next spring, teams will develop autonomous systems for identical, new Dallara Super Formula SF23 cars, which have been built specifically for the racing league. Visitors to the Gitex technology conference in Dubai this week can catch a glimpse of the racing car at the Technology Innovation Institute stand.

The car is the fastest open-wheel racing car in the world outside of Formula One, reaching maximum speeds of 185 miles

per hour. The 10 teams will adapt their software algorithms on the vehicle in order to compete. Spectators are expected to use virtual reality and augmented reality technologies, allowing them to get in the driver's seat and see firsthand head-to-head autonomous car racing, with live updates and real-time displays shown on screen.

While this type of motorsport is relatively new, autonomous racing is gaining traction around the world.

The annual Indy Autonomous Challenge, hosted at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in the U.S. beginning in 2021, was

the first such race between autonomous vehicles. Organizers of the IAC event say they were inspired by those who competed in the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (Darpa) Grand Challenge, which put forward a \$1 million prize in 2004. That competition of mostly university-affiliated teams gave rise to the modern automated vehicle industry.

Aspire, the organizers of Abu Dhabi's new league, said racing leagues for autonomous off-road vehicles and drones are also underway. ♦