

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Aiming to succeed Elissa Slotkin, Curtis Hertel mirrors her pragmatic sensibilities; Inside the army unit that handles the humanitarian needs of Gaza civilians; Jewish Washingtonians gather at Qatari Embassy to push for hostage release; 'It's a moral issue,' Five for Fighting's John Ondrasik says of new pro-Israel anthem; The man behind one of the most popular pro-Israel social media feeds; Knesset considering military tribunals, death penalty for Oct. 7 terrorists; Seed the Dream president: As we remember the 6 million killed in the Holocaust, let's not forget the 245,000 living survivors; The Hill's online show, 'Rising,' falls prey to host's anti-Israel conspiracy theories; Uncertainty surrounds Harvard's efforts to tackle antisemitism; and At Sundance, Jewish attendees gather for solidarity, advocacy and cholent.

JANUARY 25, 2024

Aiming to succeed Elissa Slotkin, Curtis Hertel mirrors her pragmatic sensibilities

'My career has been about working with anyone to get good things done for people,' the former Michigan state senator and House candidate said

By Marc Rod

Michigan's 7th Congressional District, a perennial battleground district centered around the state capital of Lansing, is shaping up to again be one of the most closely watched races in the nation.

Rep. Elissa Slotkin (D-MI), who currently holds the seat, is running for the Senate, but former state Sen. Curtis Hertel, the leading Democratic candidate to replace her, is following closely in her footsteps,

casting himself in an interview with *Jewish Insider* as a pragmatic, moderate, pro-Israel Democrat.

Hertel is playing up his credentials as a bipartisan dealmaker, explaining to *JI* during a visit to Washington, D.C. last fall, that he is running for Congress because he's "still optimistic" about getting things done through the political system in a time of increasing partisanship and division.

"My career has been about working

with anyone to get good things done for people," Hertel said during an in-person interview with *JI* at a coffee shop near the Capitol, emphasizing that he had a record of working with Republicans, Democrats and Michigan's Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer.

Average voters tell him, he continued, that they "want somebody normal. They want somebody that's willing to listen and someone that is willing to work across the

aisle and get things done.”

As of the end of September, Hertel led his expected Republican opponent, former state Sen. Tom Barrett, \$744,000 to \$485,000 in fundraising. His campaign said that he raised \$550,000 in the fourth quarter of 2023 and entered the new year with \$1 million on hand. Barrett ran against Slotkin in 2022, losing by five percentage points in one of the most expensive races in the country.

Despite Michingan’s emerging position as a hotspot for left-wing anti-Israel activism, Hertel told JI last week that he continues to stand behind Israel.

“Israel was attacked, they were attacked in a horrific way,” Hertel said. “We have a responsibility to stand with our allies when those kinds of things happen.”

He added that “I don’t think anybody wants war or the horrors that come with it” and thinks the U.S. should continue to engage with negotiations among the parties. But he said “calling for unilateral cease-fire does not make sense,” especially while Hamas continues to hold Israeli hostages and fire missiles toward Israel.

Hertel also opposes placing additional conditions or restrictions on U.S. aid to Israel.

Hertel said he doesn’t have the information or expertise to evaluate whether he agrees with Slotkin’s view, expressed in a recent letter with fellow Democrats from national security backgrounds, that Israel’s military campaign has not been carefully targeted enough.

“The people of Gaza have a right to safety,” he said. “But in many ways, Hamas is the reason why they’re unsafe.”

The former state senator told JI that he’s not worried about potential political blowback from his pro-Israel stance, emphasizing, “You have to do what you think is right, and I think the politics figure themselves out.” Hertel’s district doesn’t contain a sizable Arab or Muslim population, which is concentrated elsewhere in the state, but students at Michigan State University in East Lansing have been a key constituency for Slotkin in the past.

Hertel also emphasized that he would continue to seek and have conversations with those who disagree with him.

“The conversations are the only things

that ever solve anything in this world,” he said. “And so we have a responsibility to keep listening and keep having those conversations.”

Following the public diplomatic clash over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s comments rejecting a two-state solution, Hertel said he didn’t think he had enough information to evaluate Netanyahu’s comments, but said he’s an “optimist” who continues to support a two-state solution.

“I think we all want a better world for Palestinians and Israelis,” he said. “And I think the two-state solution and self determination is what gives that. So I’m going to continue to support that moving forward. And I’m going to believe in a world where it’s possible.”

Prior to Oct. 7, Hertel pledged that he’d stand up to fellow Democrats when they make antisemitic comments; Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), who would be a fellow member of the Michigan delegation, has been repeatedly accused of antisemitism by her own Democratic colleagues.

“If we’re going to police the other side, we have to police our side as well,” Hertel told JI in September. “One of the things that we’ve seen among Republicans is a lack of willingness to call out their own members when that happens. And so I think Dem[ocrat]s and Republicans — if you’re going to call out one side, you should call out both.”

After Oct. 7, Hertel said that the “river to the sea” slogan Tlaib endorsed “has no place in our discourse.” But he told JI he would not have voted with 22 House Democrats in favor of censuring her.

“I don’t believe that censure should be used when we disagree with somebody,” Hertel explained. “I think she was wrong and I said it publicly, and I think that every Democrat has a responsibility to do that... I don’t think the censure was the right measure.”

Hertel expressed concern about spiking antisemitism, as well as increasing incidents of Islamophobia, since the Oct. 7 attack.

“Everyone when they go to a college campus, or frankly anywhere in America has a right to be safe,” said Hertel. “It should be very simple that every human can say that that is wrong. And if you can’t say that’s wrong, if you can’t say calling for the

extermination of people is wrong, then I think you’ve lost your way.”

He described himself as “disturbed” by congressional testimony by college presidents, during which they said that calls for the genocide of Jewish people may not violate their campuses’ policies.

“The idea that only certain groups have protections from hate speech is wrong,” he continued. “The exact same rules should apply across the board.”

Hertel said that he shares Slotkin’s concerns about growing right-wing extremist activity in his district, emphasizing that extremism must be called out whether it comes from the right or the left.

Hertel told JI during his visit to Washington that this subject is “a place where my opponent and I are very, very different” — pointing to remarks by Barrett in 2022 deemphasizing the threat posed by extremists and arguing that Democrats are overstating the issue by painting all Republicans as extremists.

“To me, these are real crimes,” Hertel said. “Every person in America should have the ability to live with safety, they won’t be hated for who they are, they won’t be murdered or assaulted for who they are. That should be the basic level of what America is.”

Hertel said that right-wing extremists need to be called out and that there needs to be a “baseline of protections” against discrimination for all citizens, which involves “real consequences.”

The former state lawmaker told JI he supports the administration’s bombing campaign targeting the Houthis in Yemen, arguing that the U.S. has a responsibility to ensure that the shipping lanes in the Red Sea remain open and safe.

Prior to Oct. 7, Hertel told JI that he “worr[ied] a lot about a nuclear Iran,” and that preventing such an outcome “should be probably our top priority.”

He said he’s open to “whatever ends up preventing them from having a nuclear weapon.”

“Diplomacy is always good, and I think that should be our first goal in those situations, but if that doesn’t work, I think we have to consider all options,” he said. ♦

Inside the army unit that handles the humanitarian needs of Gaza civilians

The Coordination and Liaison Administration (CLA) for Gaza has become the lifeline between 2 million civilians stuck inside a war zone and a military battling an unyielding, brutal terrorist organization

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Inside a handful of makeshift trailers, in the heart of an expansive and bustling army base near Beersheva, a small group of standing and reserve soldiers sits in several rooms monitoring TV screens, computers and telephones trying to keep a watchful eye on the living situation for the two million Palestinian civilians inside the war-ravaged Gaza Strip.

Despite claims by international organizations and countries, including the U.S., that Israel is not doing enough to prevent a catastrophic humanitarian crisis within the Palestinian enclave, the soldiers at Sde Teiman are working around the clock to ensure that hundreds of trucks filled with aid cross into the Strip, that drinking water from Israel keeps flowing to the southern part of the territory, that fuel for desalination plants, hospitals and bakeries makes it inside safely, and that aid workers carrying out essential duties remain protected under international law.

The unit, officially titled the Coordination and Liaison Administration (CLA) for Gaza, is a division of COGAT (the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories), the military body that in times of peace works with international groups and the Palestinian Authority to facilitate entry for Palestinian civilians into Israel and helps keep the tiny Palestinian economy, including in Gaza, afloat.

Now, after more than three months of war, the soldiers that make up the CLA for Gaza have become a lifeline between civilians stuck precariously in a war zone and a military that is battling an unyielding, brutal terrorist organization.

"We are carrying out our government's policies towards the civilian population in

Gaza," Col. Moshe Tetro, who heads the CLA for Gaza, told *Jewish Insider* during a tour of the unit's busy headquarters.

"Sadly, war is a very, very ugly thing and it is even worse when civilians are stuck in the middle of it," he continued, adding that the task is heightened because the operation is taking place in a small, densely packed territory and because Hamas' military strategy is to fight from within heavily populated areas, as well as facilities that are meant to be beyond the reach of war, such as schools and hospitals.

In the two years prior to Oct. 7, when Hamas launched its deadly terror attack on southern Israel sparking the current war, Tetro recounted that the CLA's work in Gaza was the most productive it had ever been. Policies promoted by former Defense Minister Benny Gantz, now a member of Israel's war cabinet, enabled close to 20,000 Palestinian laborers to enter Israel daily and permits for those seeking medical care in Israel were increased.

The procedures were working so well that Israel was already planning to expand and streamline the main passageway from the Strip, the Erez crossing, with fast-track, computerized turnstiles. In addition, the colonel told *Ji*, Israel had bolstered its support for the local Gaza economy, allowing greater export of textiles and fish – two of the enclave's main industries – and approving more goods to enter than ever before.

"We were in the best situation that we'd been in recent years," said Tetro. "Hamas' attack on Oct. 7 destroyed it all."

When Tetro talks about the devastation caused by Hamas, he is not only referring to the brutal attack in which 1,200 people,

mostly civilians, were killed or the 240 individuals who were kidnapped, with more than 130 still being held hostage in Gaza, but also to the destruction the Iranian-backed terror group waged on the fragile relationship that existed between Israel and Gaza and the assault on Palestinian civilian life directly.

During the Oct. 7 attack, he said, Hamas destroyed much of the civilian infrastructure that served its own population, including water pipes, electrical lines, desalination plants and communication networks.

Additionally, said Tetro, Hamas destroyed the CLA's home base that was previously located at the Erez crossing; since Oct. 7, the unit operates from temporary offices in Sde Teiman. The terrorists also murdered three CLA soldiers and kidnapped three more, he said. Two of those taken hostage were later killed by terrorists in Gaza.

Despite the physical and psychological blow to the Israeli military on Oct. 7, the hard-hit unit regrouped quickly, refocusing its activities from the usual peacetime operations to full wartime footing.

Among the trailers now allocated to the unit, soldiers take charge of various humanitarian tasks aimed at easing daily life for an estimated 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza, most of whom, according to international aid agencies, are displaced and the majority of whom have had their homes destroyed in the fighting.

The first bustling office, labeled the "humanitarian situation room," is divided into four main areas focusing on health care, including existing hospitals, field hospitals and ambulances; infrastructure — water pipelines, sewage lines and fiber optic cables;

foreign relations or coordinating missions for international aid workers; and economic matters, overseeing the movement of hundreds of aid trucks that enter via two main checkpoints and navigate their way across the embattled Strip.

According to CLA data, more than 220 trucks have entered Gaza each day for the past several days, in contrast to the first few weeks of the war, when fewer than 20 per day went in. Soldiers working on the desk told JI that Israel's chief responsibility is for the security checks – ensuring weapons and so-called “dual use” items are not smuggled in – at crossings located in Nitsana and Kerem Shalom.

Though there is broad consensus about the need to prevent weapons and materiel from being smuggled into Gaza through aid shipments, many of the disagreements that Israel has with humanitarian aid organizations focus on these “dual use” items, which can be used for innocent civilian purposes or to power Hamas' war machine. Oxygen concentrators, for instance, are regularly used in hospitals for legitimate medical purposes, but they can also be used to provide oxygen for subterranean tunnels. In some cases, these kinds of products are allowed into Gaza, while other times they are blocked by Israeli authorities, and not always for clearly explained reasons.

Once Israeli security officials sign off on the cargo at the crossing points, Israel hands over the aid to international and local agencies working inside Gaza for distribution, who try to get it to those in need.

In some instances, documented on social media, however, Hamas, which has ruthlessly governed the territory for more than 16 years, takes the shipments for their own fighters. Aid agencies – and civilians – appear powerless to stop them.

In addition to facilitating the passage of the aid, which mostly arrives from the al-Arish port in northern Sinai and contains mainly goods provided by Muslim and Arab countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, the soldiers also pay close attention to the needs of the civilian population.

Via daily updates from aid workers in the field and even from Gazan contacts working in various sectors, the CLA soldiers

try to ensure that the most vital aid, whether it be flour or yeast for bakeries or anesthesia and other medications heading to hospitals, are prioritized.

Next door, soldiers in the “research and information situation room,” spend the day – and the night – monitoring open-source information such as news reports and social media coming out of Gaza, or speaking to contacts on the ground, to determine what other essential needs might arise.

For example, said Tetro, last week the manager of a hospital in Gaza informed local media that his facility was set to run out of fuel and that the hospital would be forced to close within a few hours.

“What did we do?” he said. “We picked up the phone to Palestinian medical and U.N. officials and asked them what was happening. We knew there had been no restrictions on fuel going to that hospital and that there was enough fuel there to last for a few months.”

Tetro said his team suspected that the hospital manager was peddling Hamas propaganda, as part of the terror groups information war against Israel, and, he added, “I called their bluff.” He told the aid agencies they had five hours to figure out what was really happening – within four hours, said Tetro, the hospital was suddenly reconnected to the electricity and operating again.

“The bottom line is that we are constantly facing false reports, some of which come directly from officials in international agencies,” Tetro told JI, as we entered the final room that is involved in coordinating the operation on the ground, including receiving updates from a network of CLA soldiers embedded with IDF combat units.

On Monday, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that “the long shadow of starvation is stalking the people of Gaza – along with disease, malnutrition and other health threats.”

“I am deeply troubled by the clear violation of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing,” he continued, making no mention of Israel's unique efforts to take care of a civilian population even as it battles that population's governing body.

Guterres, as well as a host of aid organizations, issued an urgent appeal on Monday for Israel to open more entry points

into Gaza and called on the Jewish state to utilize its own port in Ashdod, which has a greater capacity than al-Arish, to receive the incoming aid.

A spokesperson for COGAT explained that Israel had already opened another checkpoint and another aid entry point at the Kerem Shalom crossing and has even increased the inspection capabilities at the Nitsana crossing with an additional scanner.

“We are checking more trucks than the U.N. is able to accommodate in Gaza,” the spokesperson told JI.

“We are not surprised by such comments,” Tetro said. “We know these agencies systematically lie and use false narratives, but we are in close contact with international and Palestinian officials in order to assess the civil situation in the Gaza Strip.”

In unwavering words, the colonel added that, based on real-time data, “there is no shortage of water inside Gaza,” and, he said, there is no shortage of food.

“If [the water shortage is] causing disease, then why do those diseases not exist?” asked Tetro. “None of the data we have, including that from the international agencies, has identified any outbreaks of diseases.”

Still, Tetro added, CLA had permitted vaccines to enter Gaza – in the event of a polio outbreak or the spread of other foreboding diseases.

“I'm not saying the situation in Gaza is pleasant,” he continued. “But there is a great distance between the truth and the lies and propaganda that sadly the international community and also the media promotes, choosing to repeat the narrative of a barbaric terror organization without even checking the facts.” ♦

Jewish Washingtonians gather at Qatari Embassy to push for hostage release

The event was the first major move by the organized Jewish community to pressure Qatar, but organizers were careful not to call it a protest

By Marc Rod

On a gray, chilly morning on the edge of Washington D.C.'s Georgetown neighborhood, around 200 members of the D.C.-area Jewish community, toting U.S. and Israeli flags, the now-familiar hostage posters and a few handmade signs, gathered outside the Qatari Embassy to push for the release of the hostages being held by Hamas.

Interspersed with vigorous chants of “bring them home,” speakers, including Reps. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) and Glenn Ivey (D-MD), Virginia Democratic congressional candidate Eileen Filler-Corn and former Cuba hostage Alan Gross urged Qatar to apply more pressure on Hamas to release the remaining hostages — while also expressing gratitude for the role Qatar played in the initial round of hostage releases.

Ivey said he appreciated the work Qatar had done so far, “but we need to make sure that they understand today that we’re not where we need to get to. More needs to happen, and it needs to happen now.”

Raskin also offered thanks to Qatar, the U.S. government and the International Committee of the Red Cross for helping facilitate the first hostage deal.

“We call on Qatar — which is politically and financially in a place to make things happen — to put this at the very top of the priority list,” Raskin continued. “The hostages must be returned to their families and their communities now. On behalf of the American people, we demand that the hostages be brought home and given their freedom.”

Filler-Corn, the former speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, said: “The Qatari government can help — it already has helped secure the release of 105 hostages in November, and they can help today. That is

why I join all of you today in asking for the Qatari government to help us.”

Gross argued in his remarks that it is “within the power of the State of Qatar to effectively convince Hamas that it is in everyone’s best interests to return these hostages to their loved ones.” He called on the Qatari ambassador to tell his country’s leadership that “more needs to be done” to pressure Hamas.

The event, organized by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington was the first major public push by the organized U.S. Jewish community targeting Qatar, but organizers were careful not to describe it as a “protest,” “rally” or “demonstration.”

The event’s tone — most speakers both offering thanks to Qatar and calling for more pressure on Hamas — is reflective of the cautious approach that many U.S. Jewish communal organizations have taken toward the Qatari government.

Qatar has been a key mediator for talks with Hamas, but also hosts the terrorist group’s leadership and has backed it financially. It has become the subject of growing frustration in the U.S. Jewish community, in Congress and from Israeli leaders.

“We purposely chose the word gathering... This is an event to speak to the Qataris, to ask them to maximize their leverage over Hamas, and to use it to strongly pressure Hamas to bring as many hostages home as possible,” Ron Halber, executive director of the JCRC, told *Jewish Insider* ahead of the event. “We’re there to thank the Qataris and at the same time to press them to push Hamas.”

“Those two things are not in conflict: you’ve done a good job, you really need to do

more of a good job,” Halber said. “We need you to work even harder now and get these people free.”

He described the situation with Qatar as “complex” and said that planning the event required “nuance.” He said he had consulted with American and Israeli experts in planning the event and evaluating how much to press the Qatari government.

He noted to *JI* after the event that Qatar is a major non-NATO ally, receiving significant defense, political and economic benefits from that relationship.

“This is one of the most pressing national priority concerns for Israel, and for the United States,” Halber said. “And we expect [Qatar] to relentlessly pressure Hamas until they break and the hostages are released. And we won’t be satisfied until every one of them is home with their family, and anybody who’s been killed is brought home for proper burial.”

In his closing remarks, Halber hinted at further plans, calling Wednesday’s gathering “just the beginning of our community engagement” on the issue.

Filler-Corn told *JI* after the event, “It is my sincere hope that today’s event spurs Qatar to take action toward the release of over 100 innocent people, including as many as six Americans, who are still held hostage by Hamas. Qatar is in a unique political position to be able to facilitate the release of the hostages.”

“Our message today was clear: the hostages must be released now,” she continued.

In a follow-up interview, Gross described Hamas as a “client” of Qatar.

“We can’t stand for this,” he told *JI*. “They have to step up and play a greater role in convincing their client, Hamas, to release

those hostages... If we don't speak out and demonstrate against this type of atrocious behavior, criminal behavior, it's going to happen again and again."

He described Qatar as working "in several directions at the same time" through their control of Al Jazeera and funding of Hamas, arguing that the Qataris "need to know" that their handling of this crisis will shape their global reputation.

"It's vitally important that Israelis and Jews, no matter where they live in the diaspora, speak out — not so much against Qatar but at Qatar, so that they can play a more decent role in our civilization," Gross continued. "They want to be a player in our civilization, they've got to play in a civilized manner and not support this type of atrocity."

Halber said he was pleased with the

turnout for the event, especially given that the event was announced just 36 hours ahead of time.

Michael Blumenstock, a teacher from Bowie, Md., expressed frustration with the Qatari government, telling JI it is "disgusting" that Qatar is harboring Hamas leadership, and also raising concerns about its significant donations to U.S. colleges and universities. "We have to be tough" with Qatar, Blumenstock continued.

Lauren Simon, Maryland resident who attended the event, told JI that attending was "the least we could do on behalf of the hostages." Rebecca Jacobs, who attended with Simon, added that, as mothers, they were "thinking of all the moms and all the children and their strength" living with their loved ones in captivity.

The event went off mostly smoothly

and without interruption, although a man driving by before speeches began shouted toward the crowd about civilian suffering in Gaza, and another man with a Lyft logo in his car window flashed his middle finger to the crowd and honked his horn as he sped by after the speeches ended.

During the event, the response from passers-by was largely positive — several honked their horns in approval, offering thumbs-up or raised fists from inside their cars.

Other than a lone security guard asking the group to keep the embassy's front gate and fence clear, no one emerged from the building during the event, and the shades on nearly all of the embassy's street-facing windows remained closed. ♦

JANUARY 23, 2024

'It's a moral issue,' Five for Fighting's John Ondrasik says of new pro-Israel anthem

In interview with JI, Ondrasik discusses new single 'OK,' which reckons with the terror of Oct. 7 and the antisemitism unleashed in its wake

By Gabby Deutch

John Ondrasik's music career took off more than two decades ago when his song "Superman (It's Not Easy)" became the unofficial anthem of 9/11 first responders.

Under his stage name Five for Fighting, Ondrasik has since been nominated for a Grammy and saw his single "100 Years" go platinum. He's also made a habit of creating politically conscious music focused on global events. With his most recent single "OK," released on Friday, the Los Angeles-based songwriter turned his falsetto to the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks and their aftermath on the world stage.

The dirge-like ballad is the first time a mainstream American artist has addressed the attacks in Israel. A corresponding music video offers a powerful illustration of the somber message described in his song: "This is a time for choosing / this is a time to

mourn / the moral man is losing."

"The fact that nobody was saying anything — nobody in the arts, in Hollywood, were saying anything — just kind of stunned me and made me angry," Ondrasik told *Jewish Insider* on Monday. His recent political songs (though he prefers the term "moral" to "political") include a 2021 song focused on the consequences of the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan, and a 2022 song about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. (For that one, he recorded a music video with the Ukrainian Orchestra at a bombed-out airport outside Kyiv.)

The "OK" video begins with a clip of concert-goers at the Nova Music Festival in southern Israel before transitioning to footage of Hamas terrorists paragliding into the festival. Before Ondrasik starts singing, the video is overlaid with audio from a speech delivered by New York City

Mayor Eric Adams at a pro-Israel rally soon after the attacks: "I'm gonna give you four words. We are not alright," Adams said, while describing the atrocities of Oct. 7. "We are not alright when right here in the city of New York we have those who celebrate at the same time when the devastation is taking place."

"I kept coming back to that speech and saying, 'It seemed really brave,' but it really shouldn't be brave," Ondrasik said. "Isn't that what everybody should be saying? Why is that brave?"

The music video cycles between clips of the massacre (it begins with a word of caution, warning of "disturbing" images), video of protests in the West cheering the Hamas attack and news headlines documenting the rise of global antisemitism since October. It also includes clips from Capitol Hill: One shows Rep. Rashida Tlaib

(D-MI) declining to respond to a reporter asking her to condemn the attacks, and another shows the now-viral testimony of university presidents speaking before a congressional panel.

"It's not even really about Hamas and the evil actors. It's about the rest of the world," Ondrasik said. "That's why it's so depressing when you see these institutions in the media, in academia and in the halls of Congress that are Hamas sympathizers — or in some cases propagandists."

Ondrasik is not Jewish, nor has he traveled to Israel. (A planned trip in 2020 was canceled because of the pandemic.) But he argued that that shouldn't be a prerequisite for speaking out on this issue.

"I don't think one has to be Jewish to stand for Israel and fight against the evil that is Hamas," he said. "It's also very disconcerting to see so many Jewish people not speaking up, especially in the arts. But yeah, where are the non-Jews? I just think it's a moral issue."

The relative silence from many in the music industry has surprised Ondrasik. He said he understands the fear of artists who worry they'll be attacked for weighing in, but he doesn't think that absolves them of the responsibility to do so.

"They're scared for their families. They're worried about fan safety at concerts,

assuming they'll probably be protested if they say anything," he said. "I'm hoping that the song is a little permission, because, again, it's cliché, but each voice, each person that says something makes each one of us safer, makes each one of us stronger and makes the world a little better."

He recalled walking in Manhattan on the day of the Concert for New York City in 2001, a benefit concert that supported 9/11 first responders. One of the sights from that day stayed with him as he witnessed the antisemitism that has emerged in recent months.

"I remember after 9/11, walking down Seventh Avenue before the concert for New York, seeing the posters of those who are missing, and just being heartbroken that those folks are not going to — they'll never see their loved ones. But can anybody imagine ripping those posters down?" asked Ondrasik, who played at the concert. "Seeing stuff like that, and then our colleges run amok with antisemitism, that was certainly shocking and scary."

The 2001 concert, held at Madison Square Garden, featured dozens of performers and was organized by Paul McCartney and other British artists who wanted to honor those killed in the United States on 9/11. Ondrasik said he sees an opening to do something similar now to honor those murdered on

Oct. 7 in Israel, where Israeli artists have in recent months released scores of songs inspired by the attack and the country's resilience.

"After 9/11, the iconic musicians in the world came to America. Paul McCartney — it was his idea. They performed to provide healing for the country, and to call out this evil act. So why not now?" he asked. "I'm hoping that we can do something because music transcends in a way other things don't. It also keeps the focus on a public that has a very short attention span."

The music video for "OK" ends on an uplifting note, with images of people who have taken a stand to support Israel and oppose terrorism and antisemitism. Its final clip shows a DJ playing at the site of the Nova festival in front of posters of the Israeli hostages.

"I started looking for images of conscience," Ondrasik said. "I take no joy in doing these things. But I kind of feel an obligation to say something. And that's why I'm just so stunned that so many others that have a much bigger voice than mine have remained so silent. But hopefully, hopefully, that might change." ♦

JANUARY 23, 2024

The man behind one of the most popular pro-Israel social media feeds

Stefan Tompson runs Visegrad24 out of Poland, producing a steady stream of pro-Israel and pro-Ukraine aggregation

By Lahav Harkov

Users of X (formerly Twitter) who follow news from Israel may have noticed an account called Visegrad24 frequently popping up on their feeds in recent months with headlines and videos about the war between the Jewish state and Hamas.

Tweeting a dozen or more times per day, Visegrad24 can go from posting videos

of the IDF dropping leaflets over Gaza, to marking the death of "one of the bloodiest mass-murderers in history...dictator and...psychopath" Vladimir Lenin, to noting that Miss America 2024 is an active-duty U.S. Air Force servicemember.

The mysterious account, which shares its name with a grouping of central European countries and was named for a

Medieval gathering of kings from the region, has over 900,000 followers on X and its founders report over 3 billion impressions since the war began. It once described itself as "aggregating and curating news, politics and current affairs from Central and Eastern Europe," with emojis of all the Visegrad states. It gained international prominence after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but its

rise has been even more meteoric since the Oct. 7 attack on Israel, gaining hundreds of thousands of followers and leading the account to drop its region of origin from its bio.

Visegrad24 is one of the “new elites” on X influencing the discourse on the war, according to an October 2023 report by the University of Washington Center for an Informed Public. The study named it in the top news-focused account in views of tweets, surpassing traditional news outlets like CNN and *The New York Times*.

As a result, questions are now emerging about the people and ideas behind the account. “Propaganda or aspiring news outlet?” one article asked. *The Marker*, *Ha’aretz*’s Hebrew-language business paper, said Visegrad24 “spreads a blatant pro-Israel and pro-Ukraine narrative, including through fake news,” written by “a pair of Polish right-wing extremists who take an Islamophobic and Xenophobic line.” Polish sites have speculated about ties between Visegrad24 and Poland’s recently voted-out right-wing government, whose ministers frequently cited and praised the account.

One of the men behind Visegrad24, Stefan Tompson, 30, stepped out from the shadows and gave *Jewish Insider* a rare interview this month in which he pushed back against the accusations. Tompson discussed the mission of his social media operation, his support for Israel and how it fits with his Polish patriotism, and his view of the West as a civilization under threat.

The operation is funded by the Tompson brothers’ PR firm and uses its staff. They make some money from X subscriptions, but “it doesn’t keep the lights on,” Tompson said. They also recently registered as a 501(c)3 in the U.S., in order to receive donations. Tompson denied reports that he is funded by the Polish government, saying that he applied for a grant, but was rejected.

Tompson spoke during a visit to Tel Aviv this month to create content in support of Israel, his second-ever visit to the Jewish state after a prior Catholic pilgrimage. In addition to visiting sites of the Oct. 7 massacre and Hostages Square, Tompson and his team set up a studio in his hotel on the shore of the Mediterranean to interview survivors of the Nova Party massacre,

Holocaust survivors, politicians, activists, singer Matisyahu and more. His team has also traveled to Ramallah and Jerusalem to film content and conduct interviews.

“I’m not as interested in the war as I am in showing what this country is,” Tompson said. “I don’t think the war is this country... Israel presents itself through the wrong lens. It has to present itself as strong because it’s surrounded by states that don’t wish it well – but Europe, the U.S., especially the left, look at the world through a different lens and judge the world by their own metrics.”

According to Tompson, “the European and American left don’t understand things that are self-evident to Israelis, that you can wake up at night with a siren because someone is bombing you. If that surprises me, imagine how much more surprising it is to someone who knows nothing about this country.”

“That’s the mission we have right now, to show Israeli society and people as they are, and tell the story of resilience here,” he added.

Tompson’s lens is that of a conservative and self-described “Polish patriot.” He grew up in London and the south of France in a Polish emigre family – his great-grandfather left in 1933 – and made “my own version of *aliyah*,” he said, returning to his family’s country of origin as an adult.

He’s very bullish on the country, one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, due to a “great energy” he says Poland and Israel share, “a sense that millennials and Gen Z will do better than their parents and grandparents. That’s not the same as the West.”

“My generation is the first in 300 years of Polish history to inherit anything at all... It’s a massive transformation of society,” after centuries of foreign conquerors and communism, he said.

Israel and Poland have also resisted the “aetheization” of Western society, Tompson said, noting that many ostensibly secular Poles are “culturally Catholic,” which he compared to secular Israeli Jews having a Friday night Shabbat meal with family.

In Israel, he said “even when there is mockery of Haredim, there is an understanding that without faith, there probably wouldn’t be Jews. It’s the same in Poland; without the role of the Catholic

Church, there probably wouldn’t be an independent Poland today.”

The idea for Visegrad24 stemmed from a frustration with major media outlets’ coverage of Poland, especially relating to migration to Europe from Syria, Afghanistan and other war zones.

Tompson and his brother, who run the Visegrad24 accounts together as well as a Warsaw public relations firm, felt that the only Polish perspectives being represented in outlets like the BBC or Reuters were those of people to their left. He specifically mentioned *The Atlantic*’s Anne Appelbaum, a frequent target of the Polish right for her argument that their government undermined democracy.

Visegrad24’s first big news story came in 2021, when tens of thousands of migrants attempted to enter Poland from Belarus, viewed in the West as an intentional attack on the EU’s borders. Members of the military and police and even migrants themselves sent Visegrad24 footage of the scene, which the site posted.

“Left-wing Polish journalists were saying the government is inhumane for not letting [migrants] in, and I said, South Sudanese people coming in from Belarus obviously doesn’t make sense,” Tompson said. “I empathized with these people...They were misled and I hope they’re OK, but do I want them in the EU? No.”

He pushed back against the charge that Visegrad24 is xenophobic or Islamophobic, explaining that “we are staunchly anti-migration. We are opposed to illegal migration and mass migration.”

“It’s not a position I feel I have to defend,” he added. “It’s a legitimate view...Israel’s border is not open for anyone to come in, and I feel the same about Europe and the U.S.”

Tompson argues that he and Visegrad24 are “very cautious not to insult Islam,” and that he has “nothing but respect for [Muslims] level of belief and faith... People who mock Muslims and talk about covering bullets in pig fat – I don’t respect that and I don’t like that.” At the same time, he said, “When the Houthis call for the destruction of Israel and curse all the Jews, I don’t think it’s Islamophobic to criticize that.”

Visegrad24 was not founded to be a news organization, Tompson said: “I don’t call

myself a journalist. I'm a PR expert." After its initial mission "to provide an alternative point of view on Poland," it expanded to supporting Ukraine and fighting against Russian propaganda.

Israel fits into the Visegrad24 view because it is "part of a bigger story. We are at war against a Chinese-Russian-Persian-North Korean axis. In that sense, it is incredibly relevant to us in Poland and in the EU...This is not just a war against Israel and against Jews. This is a civilizational war, in which we are next. To not take a stand for Israel means to not take a stand for the West. It's like that famous poem, first they came for the communists, but I'm not a communist."

"When I see cities I grew up in, especially London, hundreds of thousands of people marching with Palestinian flags, it's like [the] enemy being within," Tompson added.

Tompson's pro-Israel stance has come at a great personal cost, he said, particularly as a father to a baby as he has received death threats to his home as well as his office.

He also said that, thanks to his focus on Israel, he's grateful to have met people who don't share his political views. The fact that he agreed to the interview is a kind of a testament to that, since Tompson and this reporter once sparred on X over the Polish law against accusing Poland of complicity in crimes committed by the Nazis during

the Holocaust. (Tompson has since been unblocked.)

On that matter, he called on Jews to show more sympathy for Polish suffering under German occupation, though he said he understands why it's "an irreconcilable narrative" for Jews, who "feel that they had been in Poland for 1,000 years and there was a sense of betrayal by the Poles.

"Obviously, Jews suffered more, but Jews forget that being a Slav in German-occupied Poland was no fun," he said.

More broadly, Tompson said, posting about Israel meant he came in contact with "people across the political divide who I never would have spoken to. I remain a conservative, but I also have a better understanding of...American Jews who have been involved in left-leaning social causes."

Tompson said that some conservatives criticize Jewish community advocacy for migrants, because "Israel has beautiful closed borders and we would like them ourselves," but he now understands that Jews take that position "as a minority themselves." He also noted that he met Jews who have grown more conservative since the Oct. 7 attack and say "'These people we helped want to kill us. We stood up for Black Lives Matter and now they're shouting about global capitalism and Israel.' I've had a lot of conversations about that."

As for the reactions in Poland to his pro-Israel message, after years of diplomatic tensions between the countries that were resolved – at least officially – in early 2023, Tompson argued that Polish society is sympathetic to Israel.

"A lot of people who are in the [Polish] tech industry are very aware of what's happening [in Israel]," he said.

He also said he was "excited" that Israeli politicians have asked for his help arranging meetings in Warsaw, and that he wants "World War II not to be an issue" dividing the countries.

Tompson promised that he will continue to talk about Israel in the long run: "If people are wondering whether the interest will stop when the war stops, the answer is no. I am very keen to bring back to Europe what I have seen and learned from Israel."

"The incredible attachment to your culture and respect for religion that is lost in the West...The knowledge that if you don't maintain your history you disappear. I look at this country and see babies everywhere, including in liberal Tel Aviv, and I have great respect, even envy. These are things that I see, respect and admire in Israel and would like to see them revived in the Western world." ♦

JANUARY 22, 2024

Knesset considering military tribunals, death penalty for Oct. 7 terrorists

The kind of trial they will face remains an open question — one that the Justice Ministry began to consider shortly after the attack, and one that will likely require legislation.

By Lahav Harkov

Over 100 days after they massacred Israelis in kibbutzim and cities near the Gaza border, hundreds of Hamas terrorists who participated in the Oct. 7 attack remain in Israeli prisons. The terrorists are in administrative detention, and a recent Knesset amendment extended the period in which the state can bar them from seeing a lawyer until April, as they

await trial.

But the kind of trial they will face remains an open question — one that the Justice Ministry began to consider shortly after the attack, and one that will likely require legislation. The Knesset Law, Constitution and Justice Committee has established a confidential subcommittee meeting to discuss prosecuting Hamas terrorists who

are part of the group's special forces unit, Nukhba; the subcommittee held its second meeting on Sunday.

Committee Chairman Simcha Rothman of the Religious Zionist Party told *Jewish Insider* that "the Justice Ministry already understands that we need an amendment to the law, because current criminal law does not fit the events of Oct. 7."

Regular courts would likely be overwhelmed by the number of terrorists who would need to be put on trial, creating a backlog and long delays, Chagai Vinizky, a military judge and candidate for the Supreme Court in 2021, noted in a paper for The Begin Institute for Law and Zionism submitted to the subcommittee.

Rothman expressed concern that such lengthy regular criminal proceedings “would be taken advantage of to disrupt investigations and coordinate between [the Nukhba terrorists].”

There are also difficulties in finding evidence to tie individual terrorists to specific victims beyond a reasonable doubt, as required in a murder trial. DNA samples were not collected according to usual procedure in light of the scale of the attack — 1,200 killed and thousands injured — and the need to collect the bodies in what remained an active combat zone for days. Other than the attack on the Nova music festival, the vast majority of the survivors hid and were unable to provide eyewitness descriptions of the killers. In addition, the terrorists burned many structures and bodies that could have carried evidence.

Yet, Israeli law allows for the death penalty or life in prison for those who abetted or failed to prevent genocide, including incitement or attempted participation, which may be easier to prove. In the case of Oct. 7, GoPros and cell phone recordings provide video evidence of the presence of terrorists during the attack. In addition, genocide charges would “express the unique severity of the actions,” according to the Begin Institute paper.

“There is no doubt that the goal of the massacre was to murder as many Jews as possible because they were Jews ... There is no need for the massacre to have been of hundreds of thousands of victims,” the paper stated, noting that in 2013, Israel extradited a participant in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which 7,475 people were murdered, for the crime of genocide.

Israel abolished the death penalty for murder in 1954, but crimes against humanity and treason are still capital crimes. The only people to be sentenced to death and executed in the State of Israel are Meir Tobianski, a military officer accused of espionage in 1948, who was exonerated

after his death by firing squad, and Nazi mastermind Adolf Eichmann in 1961.

Professor Amichai Cohen of the Israel Democracy Institute told *Walla!* News that, to allow for the option of the death penalty, the regular criminal process cannot be used because even if the law is changed such that capital punishment for murder is brought back, it can’t be applied retroactively to Oct. 7.

As such, the only existing options in Israel law, according to Cohen, are to establish a military court for terrorism committed in Israel, or to establish a special court for the Oct. 7 attack.

The massacre “reminds us of the Eichmann trial, but he was one person. In this case, we have to establish a special court system that will try a large number of terrorists,” Cohen said. “The advantage of such a court system is that it gives the victims the chance to make their voices heard strongly. That is part of what the Eichmann trial did, and that is the model that is supposed to deal with crimes against humanity and the death penalty is more understandable in relation to such severe crimes.”

However, Cohen also expressed concern that executing Oct. 7 terrorists could lead to Hamas killing Israeli hostages.

Israel had a military court in Lod, in which the perpetrators of especially heinous terror attacks committed inside sovereign Israel were prosecuted until it shut down in 2000; currently, military courts only hear cases of terrorism in the West Bank.

The Begin Institute recommended the reestablishment of the Lod court as a “Special Military Court for Crimes against the Jewish People, the Citizens of Israel and Humanity,” with the authority to try the Nukhba terrorists for crimes that are already on the books in Israel, such as genocide, not preventing genocide, terrorism and others. The evidentiary standard in a military court is lower than in a civilian court, based on British Mandatory law, and similar to U.S. equivalent courts.

A military court would also mean that the military defense attorneys would be appointed to the terrorists, who may have difficulty finding attorneys in the civilian world after the Public Defender’s Office announced it would not represent Oct. 7

terrorists.

The paper compared the establishment of a special military court to the Nuremberg Military Tribunal established by the U.S. after the initial Nuremberg Trials, in which only very senior Nazis were tried. Ultimately, the tribunal held 12 group hearings and tried a total of 177 Germans, some of whom were sentenced to death. Cohen said that group hearings for Oct. 7 terrorists may be possible.

The Begin Institute viewed the example of American military commissions, such as the one established in Guantanamo Bay after the Sept. 11 attack, as more relevant. The paper stated that Israel’s situation is similar to what President George W. Bush described in the November 2001 order establishing the commission: “Given the danger to the safety of the United States and the nature of international terrorism ... it is not practicable to apply in military commissions under this order the principles of law and the rules of evidence generally recognized in the trial of criminal cases in the United States district courts.” In addition, 9/11 perpetrators could only be represented by military lawyers or civilians with security clearance.

Though Israeli experts seem to favor a military court of some kind, Rothman said that “many options are on the table.”

“I think we really need to consider these processes very thoroughly and pay attention to lawsuits from the hostages and their families,” Rothman said. “We have to think outside the box. I don’t know that a military court solves all of the problems. I do think that the more time that passes, the more it seems the regular criminal process is not the right direction for many reasons, but mainly how long it takes and the large quantity of people potentially on trial ... It will be endless.”

Rothman also said that the decision will have broader implications, pointing to the Palestinian terrorist infiltration into the town of Adora in the West Bank earlier this month: “If the terrorists had succeeded, they would have done the same thing [as Oct. 7]. If they had been caught alive, would we say it doesn’t count because it didn’t happen in the Gaza envelope? This raises questions about responding to terrorism not only because of the Nukhba force, but rather more broadly.”

The Religious Zionist lawmaker said

that the Knesset is the place to advance the matter, because “the [legal] establishment is acting based on a conception that we know is no longer appropriate, but [its members] aren’t able to build something new...The Knesset must have its say.”

As one of the leading figures advancing judicial reform, Rothman had a highly controversial 2023. Yet on this issue, he said the opposition and coalition are cooperating well.

“There are some gaps, [Yisrael Beiteinu

MK] Yulia Malinovsky wants the Knesset to be more proactive, Yoav Segalovich [of Yesh Atid] wants the Justice Ministry to do more, but there is no real disagreement that there needs to be action. There is an understanding that we need to find a consensus,” Rothman said.

Rothman said that the Hamas terrorists’ trials will not begin as long as intense warfare continues.

Still, he said, “it is urgent for the State of Israel to decide what it wants...Building the

strategy is important.”

Rothman plans to travel to the U.S. at the end of the month to meet with legal experts, whom he declined to name for security reasons, to help him come up with new ideas.

“This is a global issue because Oct. 7 sparked international support for terror,” he said. “The struggle to develop new legal tools or to adjust existing tools [to fight terror] should be universal.” ♦

JANUARY 25, 2024

Seed the Dream president: As we remember the 6 million killed in the Holocaust, let’s not forget the 245,000 living survivors

New survey by Claims Conference finds a population of Holocaust survivors, mostly in Israel, who need more assistance than ever

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day this Saturday, the world will commemorate the murder of 6 million Jews. This year, just over three months after the largest number of Jews killed in a single day since World War II and amid a global outbreak of antisemitism, that need to mark and mourn the victims of the Nazi regime is yet more poignant

Yet Marcy Gringlas, the daughter of Holocaust survivors who works on their behalf, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* that there is an even more critical task than remembering those who perished — caring for the approximately 245,000 survivors who are still alive, especially now as 20% of them are over 90, resulting in increased need for care and services, according to a new report from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, more commonly known as the Claims Conference.

“The more we understood and learned, the more we were shocked about what wasn’t being told about the situation that

[some] Holocaust survivors are living in; to make decisions between food or rent and dental care or adult diapers,” said Gringlas, president of Seed the Dream Foundation, a private grantmaking foundation that initially focused on improving educational access but since 2019 has teamed up with Kavod – Ensuring Dignity for Survivors to include a special focus on helping impoverished Holocaust survivors.

The study, “*Global Demographic Report on Jewish Holocaust Survivors*,” found that the nearly 250,000 living Holocaust survivors are spread out across more than 90 countries, though roughly half live in Israel. The United States has the second-largest survivor population with 38,400.

Some 18% live in Western Europe — mostly France and Germany — and approximately 12% reside in countries of the former Soviet Union.

The median age of Jewish Holocaust survivors is 86, the youngest being 77 and the oldest being 112. The majority of Jewish Holocaust survivors are female (61%). Nearly 40% of survivors receive monthly payments through Claims Conference

programs negotiated with Germany, while the remaining population is eligible for one-time or annual payments. Survivors’ needs include homecare, food, medicine, transportation and socialization, the Claims Conference found.

“We discovered that there was a food insecurity problem with these survivors and access to getting their medications,” Gringlas said, noting that her organization’s partnership with Kavod has directed more than \$25 million to Holocaust survivors in 41 communities across the U.S. “We set up a model of national partners, we have a big coalition of people who step up and match our dollars to provide home care as many of these people don’t want to leave their homes,” she said.

“In some communities it’s difficult to match because they too are struggling,” Gringlas continued, noting that after the Oct. 7 attacks in Israel, it has become increasingly difficult to raise funds for Holocaust survivors in the U.S. because “in the most lovely, united way the Jewish community has come together to support emergency services that are required and

will continue to be required and so it's not like Holocaust survivors are forgotten, but the allocations are different."

This past year, the Claims Conference secured nearly \$1.5 billion dollars in direct compensation and home care services for Holocaust survivors for 2024 from the German government, following extended negotiations.

At the time, Claims Conference's executive vice president, Greg Schneider, told eJP that additional funding will be needed for Holocaust survivors for the next few years as their needs grow, despite the fact that more survivors will die each year.

Gideon Taylor, president of the Claims Conference, called for advocates to "double down" on their efforts on behalf of survivors.

"The data we have amassed, not only tells us how many and where survivors are, it clearly indicates that most survivors are at a period of life where their need for care and services is growing," Taylor said in a statement. "Now is the time to double down on our attention on this waning population. Now is when they need us the most."

Gringlas' father, a survivor of Auschwitz, died in 2021. She said that her mother, who survived the Holocaust as a baby by being hidden in a non-Jewish home in Slovakia,

"is part of a class of survivors who have lived long enough to unfortunately see history repeat itself.

"Following the horrific massacre of Oct. 7, and amid the historic rise in antisemitism in the United States and around the world, Holocaust survivors are the remaining witnesses to history's darkest chapter. They know antisemitism because they lived it, and they are sadly watching it again. They have much to teach us as history seems to be repeating itself, and we now have a new generation of 'survivors,'" Gringlas said, adding that "[My parents] are what inspires me every day in the work I do." ♦

JANUARY 19, 2024

The Hill's online show, 'Rising,' falls prey to host's anti-Israel conspiracy theories

Briahna Joy Gray denied documentation of Hamas' sexual violence and accused Israel of targeting its hostages in Gaza

By Matthew Kassel

“Rising,” a popular online morning news and opinion show produced by *The Hill*, has long promoted itself as a unique forum for heterodox debate not seen on other mainstream broadcasts, with two leading co-hosts from opposing ends of the political spectrum facing off on any number of hot-button issues.

The program, launched in 2018, has occasionally drawn scrutiny as an evolving cast of outspoken hosts on the populist left and right have courted controversy for amplifying fringe views.

In recent months, however, it has faced particularly fierce backlash over its incendiary left-wing commentary on the Israel-Hamas war, which critics allege has increasingly strayed into undisguised antisemitism, raising questions about whether the show's stated commitment to engaging with provocative ideas has reached a breaking point.

Since the Oct. 7 attacks, the show's most high-profile host, Briahna Joy Gray, a far-left pundit who served as the national press secretary on Bernie Sanders' 2020

presidential campaign, has repeatedly used her platform to downplay the violence, sharing commentary that some viewers have interpreted as defending Hamas' actions.

"Violence is not a violation of international law," Gray said in one broadcast shortly after the attacks. "Resistance is not a violation of international law."

More recently, Gray has sought to boost unverified claims that Israel is intentionally targeting hostages held in Gaza, as she argued in a monologue aired on Wednesday. "This is not just accidental killings in the fog of war," she said, "but seemingly a policy to prevent Israel from being in the position of having to negotiate the release of thousands of Palestinians who were imprisoned in Israel before Oct. 7, and now, in exchange for their own Israeli hostages."

The 38-year-old progressive commentator has also characterized conflicting reports about decapitated babies as being part of a propaganda campaign to tarnish Palestinians as barbaric and to justify what she has called a "genocide" in

Gaza, among other comments that have raised eyebrows among viewers.

But perhaps most troublingly to followers of the show who have expressed alarm over its recent direction, Gray, who has become unusually fixated on Israel in the wake of the attacks, has engaged in a concerted effort to cast doubt on Hamas' use of widespread sexual violence against women, the growing evidence for which she has continued to dismiss as inadequate.

"Zionists are asking that we believe the uncorroborated eyewitness account of men who describe alleged rape victims in odd, fetishistic terms," Gray wrote last month on X, formerly Twitter, where she boasts a sizable following and frequently inveighs against Israel. "Shame on Israel for not seriously investigating claims of rape and collecting rape kits."

In an episode of "Rising" earlier this month, Gray enlisted Max Blumenthal, a prominent conspiracy theorist who has spread misinformation about Hamas' terror attacks, in an effort to invalidate a recent *New York Times* investigation that established a

broad pattern of gender-based violence on Oct. 7, citing testimony from several Israelis who recalled witnessing rape.

"I think it is incumbent on us to ask questions as to why this story that is so flimsy is being pushed," she said, agreeing with Blumenthal's unfounded claim that Israel has sought to embellish the brutality of the attacks to gin up support for its ongoing war in Gaza.

Joel Rubin, a progressive activist who worked as the Jewish outreach director on Sanders' 2020 campaign and has appeared on "Rising," said he views Gray's efforts to deny the atrocities committed on Oct. 7 as part of a broader pattern of antisemitic activity that has gained traction among left-wing critics of Israel since the attacks. "These words matter, and what they do is they contribute to the dehumanization of Jews," he said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week. "We need to call it out, and we need to stand up to it."

"You can't call yourself a progressive if you're saying antisemitic things," Rubin, who is running for Congress in Maryland, explained. "This denial of violence against women is devaluing Jewish lives."

Even as Gray's commentary has faced pushback from her libertarian co-host, Robby Soave, a senior editor at *Reason* magazine whose objections to her views on the conflict have resulted in some notable shouting matches, critics say the show has too often failed to provide a platform for dissenting opinion, leading some followers to give up on the program altogether. (Soave declined to comment.)

Vanessa Santos, who leads Renegade DC, a public relations firm in Washington, said she had long defended the show and encouraged her clients to appear on the program if they were invited. "I said time after time that what I personally like about the show is that they're bringing together people with differing perspectives," Santos told *JI*. "It's a format that cable news networks have almost completely done away with."

But following the Hamas attacks, Santos said she has "decided to no longer work with the show," claiming that pro-Israel clients whom she has pitched as guests "have been cancelled on, disrespected on-air" or "ignored entirely" — experiences that she

believes have shown the program "is not interested in open and honest discourse."

"'Rising' used to be good, but it has become completely unserious, with its decline accelerating in the wake of Oct. 7," Santos said, arguing that the show "has relegated substantive political and policy discussions to Briahna's emotional outbursts and takes, and demonstrates a painfully obvious obstinacy toward fair representation of viewpoint diversity."

Santos isn't the only critic who has chosen to stop engaging with the show. One person who frequently appeared on the program before the Oct. 7 attacks, speaking anonymously to avoid reprisals, confided to *JI* that Gray's commentary has become so toxic as to preclude any future engagement.

Gray did not respond to a request for comment from *JI* on Thursday.

The new concerns raised by progressives as well as conservatives have also cast a spotlight on *The Hill*, the widely read Beltway politics site, whose staffers have reportedly voiced reservations about Gray's recent Middle East commentary. The publication's editor-in-chief, Bob Cusack, did not respond to requests for comment about the program, which is now in a transitional period following the departure last week of its executive producer, Gabi Schulte, who had been seen as an ally of Gray's, according to a source familiar with the matter. Schulte did not respond to a request for comment on the show.

Meanwhile, the show's commentary has made for an uncomfortable match with its parent company, the TV news behemoth Nexstar, which acquired *The Hill* three years ago for \$130 million — in a deal it touted as a reflection of its "commitment to deliver trusted, unbiased, fact-based journalism."

In a statement to *JI* last week, Gary Weitman, a spokesperson for Nexstar, defended the show's approach, noting that it is "designed to encourage debate."

"'Rising' is independently produced and while the show presents a diversity of opinion, it is not a news show," he said, adding, "In instances where a particular viewpoint is presented, care is taken to offer alternative perspectives. Importantly, 'Rising' is not run by *The Hill's* newsroom, which produces objective, fact-based journalism."

Still, Weitman did not address questions regarding criticism of the show's Israel commentary.

"Rising" has drawn scrutiny within Nexstar's flagship property, NewsNation, a cable outlet that has sought to position itself as an alternative to CNN and Fox News. A NewsNation contributor, speaking anonymously to address a sensitive issue, dismissed the program as "oversimplified morning show fodder," while arguing that confrontations on Israel that have devolved into shouting matches do not serve viewers' interests. "It tends to elicit the worst out of one another," the contributor said.

The Israel-Hamas war has "brought a very steep learning curve" that has been evident on the show, the contributor added. "It's revealed a lot of people who are not well-informed about the history of the conflict and the history of the region."

Beyond her "Rising" commentary, Gray has stirred outrage for misleading statements on social media, where she has falsely described the Houthis, the Iran-backed militia in Yemen that has launched rocket attacks targeting commercial vessels in the Red Sea, as "nonviolent," while demonstrating a historical ignorance of mass Jewish displacement from Arab countries after the founding of Israel.

The show, which reaches roughly 1 million viewers daily and is available on streaming platforms such as Roku, has long been a source of anti-Israel sentiment that predates Gray's tenure. In 2022, for instance, a former left-wing host, Katie Halper, was fired from "Rising" after she recorded a segment calling Israel an "apartheid state," which was never aired.

Since Halper's dismissal, however, "Rising" has increasingly become a platform for fringe views on Israel, critics say. In addition to Gray, one of the program's Friday co-hosts, Jessica Burbank, a left-wing commentator, has also been accused of spreading falsehoods about Israel — charges that she contested in an email to *JI* on Thursday.

For her part, Gray has continued to double down on Israel, now one of the show's most frequent topics of debate — even as she has faced allegations that her approach to the conflict has moved beyond legitimate debate.

It remains to be seen if the show will meaningfully change course as it seeks to hire a new executive producer, who will be expected to advocate for “the inclusion of diverse voices” and “inspire a team of producers and editors to bring their best journalism to the program,” according to a publicly available job listing.

“I genuinely hope the show makes some changes because there truly is an appetite for open and honest debate in such a highly charged political climate,” said Santos, the publicist in Washington.

Still, some critics attribute the show’s slide into extremism to broader trends that have helped fuel the rise of conspiratorial

thinking in recent months.

“One of the sad takeaways of the devaluation of Jewish lives in this case that I see,” Rubin, the former Jewish outreach director for Sanders, told JI, “is that it’s extremely popular to be antisemitic right now.” ♦

JANUARY 24, 2024

Uncertainty surrounds Harvard’s efforts to tackle antisemitism

Harvard is standing by Derek Penslar, its embattled co-chair of the antisemitism task force, amid lack of clarity over its task

By Gabby Deutch

Anyone trying to follow Harvard’s efforts to address rising antisemitism on campus has had to decipher a labyrinthine turn of events that have left even those close to the university questioning what, exactly, the strategy is.

The critical response to a co-chair of the university’s new antisemitism task force, announced last week, is just the latest unforced error for Harvard, which since the Oct. 7 terror attacks in Israel has been mired in a series of PR missteps amid widespread public scrutiny of its actions.

Some Jewish communal leaders and prominent Harvard affiliates criticized recent comments made by task force co-chair Derek Penslar, a historian and director of Harvard’s Center for Jewish Studies, minimizing the scope of antisemitism at Harvard. Some also expressed concern about public writings from Penslar adopting a left-wing approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on which he has written extensively, including a letter he signed onto that accused Israel of ethnic cleansing.

In a statement to *Jewish Insider*, Harvard on Monday stood by its choice of Penslar and Harvard Business School professor Raffaella Sadun as co-chairs. But what remains most unclear is what action the task force, with a broad mandate to research and address antisemitism, will take.

The body comes on the heels of an antisemitism advisory group created by former Harvard President Claudine Gay in November. But that group’s activities have not been made public by the university.

The group, which was comprised of several Harvard faculty members and administrators, a university trustee, one student, author Dara Horn and Rabbi David Wolpe (who resigned in December), disbanded at the end of last year.

The advisory group authored a detailed report that contained specific recommendations Harvard could take to counter antisemitism on campus, two sources with knowledge of the group’s work told JI on Tuesday. The report was shared with university administrators but otherwise is confidential and not meant to be shared with the public, one of the sources close to the advisory group said.

“The advisory group has wrapped up its work, including having come up with recommendations for the charge and work of the Task Force on Combating Antisemitism, that will lead this initiative going forward,” Harvard spokesperson Jason Newton told JI on Tuesday.

Despite its lack of transparency, the advisory group was more than a public relations move — it met roughly twice a week for two months, and each meeting

was attended by then-Provost Alan Garber, who is now Harvard’s interim president. (Gay did not consult the group before her testimony to Congress in December.) Its report included recommendations that the new task force is meant to implement, including specific guidance to enforce Harvard’s code of conduct against student protestors who interrupt classes to chant antisemitic slogans and policies to evaluate the academic rigor of speakers on campus, according to the source.

These ideas have been advocated by Jewish students and alumni for months, with little action from Harvard. Despite Gay saying in November that chants to free Palestine “from the river to the sea” come across as hateful to Jewish students, pro-Palestine protestors interrupted several classes at Harvard weeks later with that same chant.

Still, the advisory group left the task force with its report as a blueprint for future action. But none of the members of the initial group have yet been named to the task force; Penslar and Sadun were not part of the original group. With the controversy over Penslar’s appointment, Harvard is beginning a crucial task already on the defensive, promoting Penslar as a good steward of the cause while also taking steps toward appointing other members of the

task force.

Reached for comment on Monday, a Harvard spokesperson offered the names of several Jewish studies professors at other universities who could vouch for Penslar, a well-respected scholar. Among some members of the campus Jewish community and advocates with ties to the university, his appointment to lead the group raises questions.

"Being chair of a task force is not a scholarly enterprise. You need to be able to bring multiple stakeholders along, particularly where people feel very aggrieved. It is important that the person in place be someone who is not polarizing and can help the community to heal," said Miriam Elman, executive director of the Academic Engagement Network, an organization that works with Jewish faculty at U.S. universities to counter antisemitism and anti-Israel bias. (She and Penslar will appear on a panel together, discussing antisemitism, at a Center for Jewish History event in New York on Sunday.) What's most important, Elman said, is that the chair

of a committee like this "should have the trust and support of the aggrieved Jewish community on campus."

Talia Kahan, a Harvard sophomore who took a Jewish history class with Penslar in the fall, said he handled the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks thoughtfully.

"In the wake of October 7, I definitely felt fully supported as a Jewish student, and as somebody who has a lot of personal ties to Israel, by Professor Penslar," she told JI on Tuesday. "A lot of the criticism leveraged against him has come from an analysis of his scholarship to claim that he is not well equipped to be on this task force. I'm fairly confident that most people who are leveraging criticism against him have not spent a semester learning with him."

Academics view the close reading of Penslar's past writings on Zionism and his public statements about antisemitism as an affront to their profession, where freedom of expression and critical inquiry are key tenets.

"The frustration among many scholars in seeing Penslar become a target and a

focal point for debate about this is that we need to be focused on the larger goal of thinking critically and carefully about these institutions and really using evidence-based methods," said James Loeffler, a professor of modern Jewish history at Johns Hopkins University who has worked closely with Penslar. "I want the people who are charged to investigate and to come up with solutions to really be singularly focused on honesty and academic rigor."

Any timeline for the task force to name its members or implement new policies has not been made public. Back from winter break, Harvard Jewish students continue to complain of a toxic environment. *The Harvard Crimson* reported on Monday that the university sent a selection of antisemitic messages posted on an anonymous chat app for Harvard undergraduates to the campus police, to investigate whether law enforcement should get involved.

Kahan, on her first day back after winter break, walked by posters with the photos of Israeli hostages. They had been vandalized. ♦

JANUARY 23, 2024

At Sundance, Jewish attendees gather for solidarity, advocacy and cholent

One Tel Aviv resident put together a last-minute event to raise the issue of the hostages still held in Gaza; at a 'Shabbat Lounge,' visitors could dine on traditional fare

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

For 13 years, Inbal Baum has been running a Tel Aviv-based food tour company called Delicious Israel, which guides visitors through the markets and streets of her city. Baum moved to Park City, Utah, in 2021, to run a spinoff of that company, a corporate food events business, but felt isolated from the country she still considers her home, especially after Oct. 7. But at one event — on "a super freezing-cold night in the middle" of this week's Sundance Film Festival — she felt connected, Baum

told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

Sundance, which opened last Thursday and runs through Sunday, is an annual who's who of established and up-and-coming film talent, with Hollywood celebrities and producers descending on Park City, Utah, mixing with cinephiles, journalists and myriad creative types at parties and independent movie screenings. During this year's festival, the specter of Oct. 7 floated through its few Jewish-themed events — some on the official schedule, some not. These included a Shabbat program, panels about Jewish representation and a Friday night solidarity event, created to amplify

participants' awareness of the hostages, that several Sundance attendees called "special" and "absolutely beautiful." In these spaces, Jews, Israelis and their allies could gather safely.

"It genuinely felt like coming home in a very unusual setting," Baum told eJP about the solidarity event featuring influencers and family members of the Oct. 7 hostages. Although many of the stories were "tear-inducing, moving, tragic and harsh, hearing the reality about the families, the hostages and survivors," she said, the presence of Jewish community was moving.

Israeli-American musician Rami Matan

Even-Esh, better known by his rapper moniker Kosha Dillz, attended various Jewish events — as well as a pro-Palestinian protest — where he tried to address the demonstrators until law enforcement asked him to leave.

Even-Esh came to Park City for the festival despite Sundance's rejection of his short film "It Doesn't Have to Be So Serious" — a dark comedy about Jewish trauma, especially Holocaust trauma, and how to deal with it, he told eJP. He "had some nice meetings with people" who had been interested in his work, especially his "Bring Our Family Home" online series, which he's trying to produce for television.

The Friday night solidarity event started with a spontaneous request. Discovering that a friend's friend routinely held large parties at Sundance in a warehouse-type space, Tel Aviv resident and digital strategist Jacob Shwartz told eJP that he asked if the party-makers would be open to holding an event beforehand that would "bring the agenda of the hostages to the forefront and keep it top of mind as one of the cultural high points of the Hollywood calendar."

A "yes" made the idea a reality, with Shwartz "rallying, hustling and talking to anyone and everyone," he said, adding that he encountered "a lot of people wanting to do good and rallying around this idea."

The Hostages and Missing Families Forum sent a delegation to speak at the event. Birthright Israel, the Maccabee Task Force, the Israel on Campus Coalition (through Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies) and others provided basic funding. Through a network of media influencers, he reached out to Caroline D'Amore, Daniel-Ryan Spaulding and Israeli YouTuber Ashley Waxman Bakshi, and connected to actress Emmanuelle Chriqui, all of whom have used their platforms to speak in support of Israel, the hostages and their families, as well as Jews worldwide.

Baum, who connected event organizers with the local Park City community, said it's a feeling of what she calls "the '*b'yachadness*' [togetherness] of not having to explain who you are."

"The feeling is incredible when, across the world from Israel, you can gather in a group like this [at the solidarity event] and it feels so secure and so at home," she said.

The standing-room-only crowd of more than 250 people, some Sundance attendees and other visitors, was an opportunity to show support. Because it wasn't walkable from Sundance venues, it was "a real commitment to be there," Shwartz said, "and people did it. It was heartwarming and amazing."

Cholent-n-Chill: Shabbat Lounge

Many Shabbat-observant Jews and their friends found themselves taking advantage of the hospitality at the Shabbat Lounge, for inspiration, relaxation and a spiritual lift, along with warm refreshments — a welcome respite from the freezing temperatures. Presented by Shabbat Tent, executive produced by JConnect, Pico Shul and the Alevy Family Foundation, and produced by MarVista Entertainment, the lounge promised a chill environment where people could drink cocktails, eat cholent and other Shabbat foods and socialize, from Friday night candle lighting through Saturday night's musical *Havdalah* event. On Sunday, the space was used for two events centering on Jewish and Israeli film.

Filmmakers as media fighters

On Sunday morning, journalist Malina Saval moderated a discussion with Allison Josephs, founder of Jew in the City, and Israeli actor, writer and advocate Noa Tishby on the subject of "Sects, Lies and Videotape: Debunking Deadly Tropes About Jews and Israel in TV, Film and Media." The wide-ranging conversation included a discussion about the need for Jews to be included in efforts of diversity, equity and inclusion, and the importance of presenting Jewish stories in an authentic light, especially with the flood of antisemitic incidents since the massacre. The session closed with a movie trailer that had been making its rounds on the internet promising "the horror movie of the year that isn't a movie at all" — the trailer shows footage from Oct. 7, assembled by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, and has been screened in U.S. theaters.

Tishby, in particular, enthralled the audience, Saval told eJP.

"Noa has emerged as the Queen Esther of our time," Saval said. "People were enthralled

by her, asking for pictures and thanking her for her advocacy," Saval continued. "To have Noa come to Utah was a big thrill for them."

The Jewish Filmmakers Network hosted "Filmmakers Against Antisemitism," a gathering of 55 Jewish filmmakers and friends of the community who were inspired to take action following Oct. 7, network founder Marcus Freed told eJP. The event featured Aaron Erol Ozlevi, a Turkish movie director who fled Turkey because of antisemitism, and Lance Kramer, whose new film-in-progress documents the story of his relative Liat Beinon Atzili, who was taken hostage on Oct. 7 and released the following month and whose husband, Aviv Atzili, was murdered.

"We are fighting an army of antisemitic propaganda across social media and traditional media, and now is the time to channel creativity to fight antisemitism," Freed, also a writer and actor, said. Whatever the medium, he added, "now is the age for storytellers. We need to use our skills to put our efforts into creating positive pro-Jewish and pro-Israel content."

Another event, "Conversation: The Impact of October 7th on Israeli Cinema," drew attendees of all generations to learn about how the massacres have already affected the Israeli film industry.

"We saw an incredible range of highly motivated creatives who are ready to use their honed skills to fight against all of the Jew hatred, whether it is using humor, real news or hard-hitting facts," Freed said, adding, "it has opened up possibilities for collaborations across the USA and beyond." ♦