The former Facebook exec seeking to re-center Harvard

Sam Lessin said he believes in a robust free speech culture inside the classroom, but a crackdown on anti-Jewish harassment on campus

By Gabby Deutch

Before last year, tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist Sam Lessin thought of himself as only slightly more engaged with Harvard than the average Cambridge graduate. In his 20s, he had served as an alumni interviewer; since then, he’s helped raise money from fellow graduates in the class of 2005.

But Harvard was not his identity — Lessin didn’t make a habit of flying across the country to Harvard football games, nor was the former Facebook executive a major donor to the university, even after he likely made a windfall when Facebook went public.

That changed last fall, after the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel spurred a rise in antisemitism on American campuses, including at Harvard, and set off a ripple effect of bad decisions that would mire the Ivy League university in scandal and months of brutal headlines. Lessin stepped off the sidelines.

In late December, Lessin announced a long-shot write-in bid to be a candidate to serve on Harvard’s Board of Overseers, the university’s second-highest governing body. He came just a few hundred votes short of qualifying for a spot on the ballot, winning more support than any of the other outside candidates that had not been approved by the Harvard Alumni Association.

“It actually was very invigorating in that you just do see this huge mass of alums coming out of the woodwork who do want change, and I’m optimistic that there can...
Ackman. that he viewed in contrast to Harvard's Harvard has become entangled, a position seeking to avoid the culture wars in which have very little willingness to push back."

They have so much political liability, and they are not necessarily the right voices to be running out of time.

The mounting controversies at Harvard in recent months — including student protesters disrupting classes and common spaces on campus, former President Claudine Gay’s disastrous Capitol Hill testimony and the resulting leadership vacuum — can be traced, in Lessin’s, to “mission creep” at Harvard. He thinks his alma mater has shifted from an institution whose raison d’etre is academic excellence to a place that has tried to accommodate too many goals, and to make itself too many things to too many different people.

“You need to get the president and the [Harvard] Corporation to reaffirm that very clearly the school is an academic school and academic excellence is the only goal,” Lessin said. “It’s not that and six other goals.”

He decried a yes-man culture among Harvard’s lay leaders, many of whom are large donors or prominent Harvard boosters, who have governed the school with an utter lack of transparency even as the world’s attention has turned to Cambridge in recent months.

“That can work when things are easy,” said Lessin. “When things are hard, those are not necessarily the right voices to be leading. The reason is simple, which is, they have so much political liability, and they have very little willingness to push back.”

Lessin described himself as a moderate seeking to avoid the culture wars in which Harvard has become entangled, a position that he viewed in contrast to Harvard’s loudest critic: hedge fund manager Bill Ackman.

“I believe strongly that there should be free speech in the classroom towards the goal of academic excellence. If people want to make a civil argument about why rape and murder is OK, inside of the classroom — from my personal perspective, I think that’s fair game,” he said. “That is the thing I think is nuanced about this, and I might not agree with every Jew about.”

“I worry that he’s politicizing this even more, in certain ways, putting forward right-wing voices against left-wing voices. I’m much more of a centrist, is the way I would approach it,” said Lessin. Instead, he earned the endorsement of another billionaire who studied at Harvard — Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg. (As a Harvard dropout, Zuckerberg was not able to vote for Lessin.)

Harvard, like other prestigious universities, has over the past decade made a concerted effort to increase diversity in its student body. Lessin said the way the university has emphasized diversity has in turn led to “factionalism” rather than “academic excellence.”

“If you’re looking at the admissions essays, ‘What makes you diverse, and then what do you intend to do with that, like, your Harvard education to help the world?’” Lessin asked. “It became very, very tribal, in terms of people saying, ‘I’m here as the token X,’ or ‘I’m here to represent my community Y’; and it’s not to learn and be part of society and help people integrate into the melting pot of society. Instead it’s like, ‘I’m here to defend that group.’”

The goal of the university, then, should be to get back to promoting academics as the school’s top goal, including absolute freedom of expression in an academic setting, as Lessin sees it. He extends that thinking even to the most abhorrent anti-Israel rhetoric Harvard has seen since Oct. 7.

“I believe strongly that there should be free speech in the classroom towards the goal of academic excellence. If people want to make a civil argument about why rape and murder is OK, inside of the classroom — from my personal perspective, I think that’s fair game,” he said. “That is the thing I think is nuanced about this, and I might not agree with every Jew about.”

But what happens outside of the classroom is another story. This is where he thinks Harvard has a responsibility to act much more strongly against antisemitic student protests, which he views as “more of a symptom than a root cause.” The answer is not “treating it as a one-off,” but rather, according to Lessin, revamping the way Harvard thinks about freedom of expression.

“Sam’s emergence as someone who wants to help correct and change the narrative and to restore the dignity of Harvard, and help elevate the discussion and challenge the status quo that that allowed for this rise of anti-Israel and antisemitic rhetoric on the campus couldn’t have come at a more important moment,” Harvard Chabad Rabbi Hirschy Zarchi told JI.

“What you say in the Boston Common is a different situation. If you want to have protests there, that is a space for free speech. Private property at a private university with a purely academic mission is actually a place you don’t have free speech for the sake of free speech,” said Lessin. “Any speech to shut down other people, or to keep them from participating in academic endeavors, or to block academics, is completely unacceptable on private property.” Policies, he continued, must be “enforced and strengthened” so protests in Harvard Yard cannot disrupt people walking to class.

“It’s private property, full stop,” Lessin said. During his six-week campaign for a seat on the board, he engaged alumni across the world, including among Harvard’s Jewish community; during college Lessin occasionally attended Hillel or Chabad Shabbat dinners, but was not a regular at either.
Rep. Andy Kim keeps his distance from some progressive backers

In the New Jersey Senate race, Kim is the favorite of left-wing groups critical of Israel

By Matthew Kassel

In the first New Jersey Senate debate on Sunday night, the two leading Democratic candidates, Rep. Andy Kim (D-NJ) and First Lady Tammy Murphy, each spoke briefly on the Israel-Hamas war, reiterating their commitment to immediately freeing the hostages and voicing concerns over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

But whereas Murphy refrained from addressing calls for a cease-fire, Kim said he was open to what he described as a “chance for a bilateral cease-fire” conditioned on releasing the captives held in Gaza, marking one of the few instances in which he has publicly taken a position on an increasingly polarizing issue.

Days before the debate, meanwhile, a spokesperson for Murphy’s campaign, Alex Altman, confirmed to Jewish Insider that the first lady “believes that we cannot have a conversation about a cease-fire until the hostages are home — including Edan Alexander of Tenafly, N.J., whose parents she has met with recently.”

Even as the two primary rivals are largely aligned on Israel, their differing answers to a key question underscored the first Middle East policy contrast in a close race driven so far by competing claims to party loyalty and qualifications for office.

It remains to be seen, however, if the conflict will become an issue in the June primary to oust indicted Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ), especially as each candidate has continued to support Israel in its war with Hamas.

In an interview with JI late last week, Kim emphasized that he is willing to entertain the possibility of a bilateral cease-fire if it is part of a negotiated diplomatic agreement where the remaining hostages are safely returned, which he called a “critical component” of any potential resolution.

Even as he stressed that Hamas “cannot be trusted,” Kim expressed hope that an eventual cessation of hostilities could be realized with the help of regional allies while ensuring that Israel “has the resources it needs to be able to defend itself.” No deal is “going to be perfect,” he added. “But if we can try to move in terms of that kind of direction, I really do think that the magnitude of this crisis right now does demand at least an effort to try to see if something more durable can come out of this.”

“That can’t be something that’s just unilateral on either side,” he clarified. “Otherwise it wouldn’t be an actual cease-fire.”

In drawing such distinctions, Kim, 41, was tacitly distancing himself from some of his progressive backers calling for a unilateral cease-fire, most notably including the left-wing advocacy group Indivisible, which endorsed his campaign earlier this month.

The endorsement from Indivisible, which has called on its members to exert pressure on lawmakers to back an immediate cease-fire, has raised concerns among some pro-Israel supporters of Murphy who have privately voiced reservations that Kim’s ties to the group could influence his views on Israel, according to a Jewish leader in New Jersey who spoke with JI last week.

But Kim indicated that he would take a more nuanced approach to the conflict than some members of his activist base, relying largely on his background as a former diplomat and national security adviser in the Obama administration to shape his thinking. “I very much approach this from my experience in diplomacy,” he said, citing his participation in past negotiations “to come up with terms for different cease-fires in different situations in conflict across the Middle East.”

Flipping the script, Kim, a three-term lawmaker, said his opponent has already demonstrated she is unprepared for serious foreign policy discussions, pointing to recent comments in which Murphy has suggested that Hamas’ attacks were “instigated as a proxy war” by Iran, Russia, China and North Korea “in order to distract the West” from the war in Ukraine.

“I have no idea where this is coming from, and I’m very alarmed by this theory of hers that she seems very, very hung up on,” Kim said, criticizing what he called Murphy’s “lack of experience” in engaging with foreign conflicts. “It doesn’t track with any of the assessments from the intelligence community.”

For Kim, the remarks underscored what he called a “fundamental” difference in perspective, cautioning that her theory could have consequences if she is elected. “To be a candidate for the United States Senate and to say that publicly,” he argued, “hurts our ability to be able to look at what we need to do to deliver for Israel, for Israel’s defense, and focus on specifically what’s going on when it comes to the Middle East region.”

Murphy’s campaign said the first lady was not available for an interview last week and did not address a request for clarification regarding her theory on the Hamas attacks.

In a statement to JI, Altman, her spokesperson, said that Murphy “is the daughter of a proudly Jewish father and has
visited Israel nine times,” adding, “Tammy is an unequivocal supporter of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship and believes they have every right to defend themselves following the Oct. 7 terrorist attack by Hamas.”

“Tammy has been a vocal supporter of a two-state solution that creates security and lasting peace,” Altman said last week.

In her first campaign for elective office, the first lady, who is married to Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, has yet to detail her Middle East policy positions in depth, even as she has strongly condemned Hamas and often invoked her personal connection to Judaism and Israel. She is now at work on an Israel position paper that her campaign plans to distribute when it is ready, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Murphy, 58, has built warm relations with Jewish and pro-Israel activists during her time in the governor's mansion, and is “well-known in the Jewish community,” said the Jewish leader from New Jersey, who is close to the first lady.

“I'm not so sure that Congressman Kim can cite that level of connectivity,” the Jewish leader, who was granted anonymity to speak candidly, told JI last week. “It's not something that is necessarily tangible or quantifiable from a policy standpoint.”

But while Murphy has won endorsements from several pro-Israel House Democrats in the state, Kim's backers in Congress say he is better equipped for a job that requires a sophisticated knowledge of international affairs.

“I always am encouraged to see people with a depth of understanding of such matters running for House or Senate,” Rep. Susan Wild (D-PA), a Jewish Democrat backing Kim who sits on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a recent text message to JI. “Andy fits that bill exactly. And, as far as Israel is concerned, Andy leads on the Iron Dome funding every year. So I think he's a hugely important player in matters involving Israel.”

Still, most leading pro-Israel groups have stood behind Menendez, the embattled senior senator who is facing federal bribery charges that have all but ensured he will not serve another term. While he has yet to announce if he will seek reelection, an AIPAC spokesperson confirmed its endorsement of Menendez, long viewed as a pro-Israel champion, remains in effect, even as recent filings show the group hasn’t bundled any campaign contributions.

The spokesperson declined to comment on AIPAC's broader engagement in the primary, but a source familiar with its outreach said that Murphy “has had productive conversations” with the pro-Israel group.

NORPAC, an influential pro-Israel advocacy group in New Jersey, is also still backing Menendez, while Democratic Majority for Israel has indicated that it will continue to support him, saying “he is entitled to a full and fair legal process.”

Phil Goldschmiedt, a pro-Israel leader in North Jersey who recently launched a new group called the Bergen AIPAC Network, said that he is for now committed to standing by Menendez, who was “brave enough to go against his party's line and President Obama and voted against the” Iran nuclear deal.

“We also believe that he is not above the law but also certainly not below the law either and should be given his day in court as we are all entitled to,” Goldschmiedt told JI last week. “He will need to make his decision by the end of March what his chances are for reelection and whether or not he will run.”

Halie Soifer, CEO of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, suggested that her group would likely wait to make an endorsement in the primary until it has hosted a candidate forum.

For his part, Kim has the backing of J Street, the progressive Israel advocacy group that has backed him since his first election in 2018. Tali DeGroot, J Street's national political director, said the group has also “been in touch with” Murphy's campaign and looks forward “to learning more about her positions vis a vis the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

Speaking with JI, Kim clarified that he has not engaged in “political conversations” with any such groups to seek endorsements, including from J Street and AIPAC, since he launched his campaign shortly before the Oct. 7 attacks last fall.

“I want people to look at what I'm doing not from any purpose of what might be good for a campaign,” he claimed. “I want them to know I'm a serious professional when it comes to national security. This is not something that I do on the side.”
Keir Starmer facing the ghost of Jeremy Corbyn within the Labour party

The Labour Party leader is now calling for a ‘cease-fire that lasts,’ amid pressure from anti-Israel lawmakers in his party

By Lianne Kolirin

In the latest sign that the anti-Israel left in Britain is gaining momentum, Keir Starmer, leader of Britain’s Labour party, has called for a full and permanent cease-fire in Gaza, a policy turnaround for the politician widely seen as the country’s next prime minister.

Speaking in Glasgow at Scottish Labour’s conference on Sunday, Starmer won lengthy applause when he called for the fighting to “stop now” and called for a “cease-fire that lasts.”

The Labour leader’s speech, in which he also warned Israel against an assault on the southern Gaza city of Rafah, came just days ahead of a vote in the House of Commons, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), for an immediate cease-fire. Members of the Scottish wing of the Labour party had also been backing such calls.

In the immediate aftermath of Hamas’ murderous attacks on Oct. 7, Starmer was unequivocal in his support for Israel. He received a standing ovation at the Labour party conference in Liverpool that same weekend, when he forcefully condemned the attacks.

The following month he called for a “humanitarian pause,” and asked his party to abstain on a previous SNP motion to back a cease-fire. But the issue was proving divisive, leading 56 Labour MPs to rebel over the vote and prompting many resignations from front-bench politicians.

Some political observers feel Starmer’s hardening position is, in part, fueled by fear of losing Muslim votes — particularly with a general election drawing closer.

In a recent article in The Guardian, an unnamed senior Labour source, said: “Muslims are not only predominantly Labour supporters but they are also geographically important. There are many of them in a range of key target seats in both the south and the north-west, and we need to pay attention to that.”

The data backs up the party’s concerns. Earlier this month a Survation poll for the Labour Muslim Network revealed that support among Muslims has dropped from 86% to 60% since 2021.

Another study, carried out by More in Common, a research agency seeking to “strengthen democratic societies by countering division and polarization,” showed most Britons have not taken a side in the conflict, with 61% saying they sympathize with both sides, neither side or aren’t sure.

“We need to recognize that post-October 7 and the war in Gaza, there’s been a quantum change in the amount of conspiracy theories and misinformation floating around social media,” said Mike Katz, chairman of Jewish Labour Movement, in an interview with Jewish Insider. “It’s incredibly divisive and we need to ensure these haven’t been picked up or propagated by people who want to, or do, represent Labour.”

Starmer became Labour party leader in 2020 after his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, lost in a landslide to former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. One of his key pledges on taking over was to rid the party of the antisemitism it had become associated with under Corbyn.

Months later a long-awaited report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found there had been a “breakdown of trust” between the Labour party and the Jewish community. The party was placed in “special measures” after the report revealed evidence of “harassment and discrimination.” This was a period of monitoring during which the party was required to implement an emergency action plan to drive out antisemitism or face legal action for its “serious failings.”

Those measures were lifted a year ago and Jewish members, who had previously resigned, have been returning to Labour under Starmer. Nevertheless, since the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attack against Israel and rising antisemitism in the U.K. the issue has reasserted itself.

This month, Azhar Ali, one of the party’s nominees for a key legislative election in a constituency with a significant Muslim electorate in northwest England (Rochdale), claimed Israel had deliberately allowed the terrorists to target its people in order to get the “green light” to invade Gaza. Ali, who was defending the Labour-held seat, shared the conspiracy theory at a meeting of the Lancashire Labor Party on Oct. 31.

The Mail on Sunday reported him saying: “The Egyptians are saying that they warned Israel ten days earlier… Americans warned them a day before [that] there’s something happening… They deliberately took the security off, they allowed… that massacre that gives them the green light to do whatever they bloody want.”

What shocked many within Britain’s Jewish community and beyond, was that Starmer initially stood by Ali.

A tweet from Labour Against Antisemitism on Feb. 11, said: “The Labour Party should be moving swiftly to replace or stand down Azhar Ali, their candidate in the Rochdale by-election, following evidence of his antisemitism. Anything less is a reversion to the darkest days of the Corbyn era.”

Starmer faced intense pressure to act against his candidate’s antisemitic behavior.
and eventually Labour took the highly unusual step of withdrawing its support. Ali will now run as an independent, leaving Labour without an official candidate.

Two days later, Starmer withdrew his support from another Labour candidate who attended the same meeting, Graham Jones, the candidate for Hyndburn, was recorded talking about “f***ing Israel” and said British volunteers to the IDF “should be locked up.”

Katz, the chairman of the Jewish Labour Movement, told Jewish Insider that the episode “was not our finest hour,” but firmly dismissed suggestions that Corbynism is back to haunt the party.

“It’s ludicrous to suggest that — as [Prime Minister] Rishi Sunak and other Tories have — that the party hasn’t changed since Corbyn’s leadership,” he said. “The difference is like night and day.

“Keir has shown a deep personal commitment on tackling antisemitism. Just last week marked a year since the EHRC took Labour out of special measures, following its unprecedented, damning report into Labour antisemitism.

“People will see the Tories are acting out of desperation on this; and for the Jewish community, we’re just tired of being used as a political football.”

Dame Louise Ellman, a long-standing Labour MP who quit the party in 2019 after 55 years, said she returned to Labour after Corbyn was ousted because of Starmer’s leadership.

“I left the party because of Corbyn and antisemitism. I fought it for a long time but in the end it became unbearable,” the former MP and Labour party grandee told JI.

She said she would “never join another party” but that “if Labour ever dealt with its antisemitism I’d return.”

“On the day that he [Starmer] was elected leader of the Labour party he actually phoned me up and said he would make it his first priority to deal with antisemitism and he hoped I’d feel able to rejoin,” Ellman said. “I rejoined two years later in 2021 at the party conference because I could see that he was dealing with antisemitism.”

Although antisemitism “isn’t entirely dealt with” and “will always be ongoing business,” Ellman believes Starmer “has changed the party in a very radical way and antisemites are no longer welcome.”

The episode in Rochdale was particularly shocking, she said, as she worked closely with Ali for 20 years on issues such as antisemitism and extremism.

She was “astounded” when she heard his comments, which ultimately made it “untenable” for Labour to continue to support him.

On Starmer’s calls for a cease-fire, Ellman said: “Some of the words might be a bit tougher, but I don’t see any change in position.” She pointed out that he has called for a “sustainable cease-fire,” which must include the release of hostages and dealing with Hamas.

This has been echoed by Labour Friends of Israel, who posted an update on its website saying: “Keir Starmer is right: we urgently need an end to the fighting and a permanent and sustainable ceasefire in Gaza.”

It called for the protection of civilians in Gaza and “genuine progress towards a negotiated two-state solution,” but emphasized that hostages must be released, rocket attacks stopped and, critically, “Hamas must be disarmed and have no role in the future governance of Gaza.”

As Starmer’s Labour party deals with antisemitism in his party’s ranks, it continues to rise in the U.K. Last week a report from the Community Security Trust (CST), a charity protecting the U.K. Jewish community and monitoring antisemitism, revealed that anti-Jewish hatred is at its highest point since records were tallied. Researchers found that 4,103 antisemitic incidents were reported in 2023. They suggested the rise was due to “the unparallelled volume of antisemitism perpetrated following the Hamas terror attack.”

“Antisemitism, as the saying goes, is a light sleeper,” said Katz. “That’s why we as JLM need to support the party in being ever-vigilant for left antisemitism, and to continue to educate members and elected representatives on what antisemitism looks like, how to engage with it critically and — most importantly — how to call it out.”

“This isn’t difficult: there are plenty of Labour MPs who advocate strongly for Palestine without being antisemitic, even in these heightened times of tension,” Katz continued. “Both the Jewish and Muslim communities are here to stay in this country. “We have to, as a party that seeks to lead on multiculturalism and tolerance, demonstrate leadership in bringing the two together.”
The Israeli reservist fighting for his son’s life

Gadi Roz’s 6-year-old son Meitar is battling a degenerative condition known as Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, for which there is no cure

By Lianne Kolirin

For Gadi Roz, a major in the IDF, the front line and the home front have collided, with life-and-death consequences. Since Oct. 7, Roz, a reservist, has spent months fighting in Gaza, while back home, his 6-year-old son Meitar is battling a degenerative condition known as Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, for which there is no cure. When he is not with his unit, Roz has been pressing the Israeli government — so far, to no avail — to approve a promising gene-therapy treatment for DMD, one approved last year by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Roz, 35, describes “fighting two wars” — one for the future of Israel and one for the life of his son.

Meitar, the younger of Roz’s two children with his wife, Eliya, was diagnosed with the life-limiting condition when he was 3.

“Our world collapsed,” Roz, who had never previously heard of the illness, told Jewish Insider.

Since his son’s diagnosis, the decorated soldier, who in his civilian life works in high-tech while also studying for a degree in electronic and electrical engineering, has been campaigning to convince Israel’s Ministry of Health and the health-care providers to authorize a pioneering gene-therapy treatment approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last year.

“It was very hard on us, but I realized I had one of two decisions to make,” said Roz.

The first, he said, was to “say, OK, my son is going to die, let’s make the best of those years, quit my job, stop learning and just gather positive experiences.”

But this, he said, “is not me.”

“I’m not the one that gives up, I’m the one that pursues my dreams, says there is always a hope and there is always a solution and you just need to find it.”

In the wake of the diagnosis, Roz has “turned over every stone” to try to find a treatment that would slow the progression of the disease in order to save his son’s life.

Prior to being called up for military reserve service on Oct. 7, he campaigned fiercely to get the government to approve a groundbreaking treatment that has displayed promising results.

Roz has spent most of the time since the Hamas attack fighting in Gaza, which has made him even more determined to win approval for the new drug. Over recent weeks, he has appeared in the Israeli media — often in uniform — calling on the government and Israel’s medical insurers to green-light a potentially life-saving new treatment for his son — and others like him.

“It’s the next best thing to a cure that these children have,” he told JI, adding that there are around 300 people with DMD in Israel and some 15 would be eligible for the treatment.

Typically diagnosed in early childhood, DMD is a progressive condition that causes muscle to gradually weaken and waste away. There is no cure and the deterioration is rapid, meaning most patients are wheelchair-reliant by early adolescence.

Affecting mainly boys, DMD is caused by a mutation on the dystrophin gene that protects the muscles. The devastating syndrome eventually affects all the muscles, including the heart and lungs, and, according to the Israeli government, “in most cases leads to death in the second or third decade of the patient’s life.”

The drug, from biotech company Sarepta Therapeutics, is called Elevidys and is administered in a single dose intravenously. It aims to deliver a working copy of a faulty gene that leads to the disease.

Children who participated in initial trials in the U.S. showed sustained motor function over several years when compared with those who did not receive the therapy, researchers said.

More research is needed on Elevidys, according to the FDA, but initial results have been promising. The problem for Roz and other families, however, is the eye-watering price tag. At $3.2 million per dose, Elevidys is one of the most expensive drugs in the world.

Without approval for the medication from the Ministry of Health, Meitar and other children like him face a bleak future.

Prof. Cyrille Cohen is head of the laboratory of immunotherapy at Bar-Ilan University. He outlined the system of approving new medical treatments in Israel.

“In many developed countries, pharmaceutical treatments undergo a rigorous approval process, initiated by pharmaceutical companies and overseen by health ministries,” Cohen said. “This process comprises three clinical phases: Phase 1 assesses safety in a small group of healthy volunteers; Phase 2 evaluates initial effectiveness and safety in a larger patient group; and Phase 3 involves a diverse patient population across multiple centers to assess broad effectiveness, safety, and potential side effects.”

“While FDA or EMA [European Medicines Agency] approval can expedite the process in Israel, the Ministry of Health...”
independently evaluates each treatment, highlighting the country’s regulatory autonomy. Approval in one jurisdiction does not guarantee automatic approval in another, emphasizing the importance of thorough assessments by each regulatory body.”

The Roz family is currently hoping that the gene therapy can be added to the “sal trufot” – or medicine basket – which will ultimately decide whether or not it will be funded by the state.

“After a treatment is approved for use in Israel, the question remains who will finance it,” Cohen said. The Sal trufot, which is updated every year by a committee of experts, includes all the medicine/treatments that will be financed by the state of Israel.

“The considerations are multiple and include for example what the efficacy of the treatment is and who and how many will benefit from it,” he said. “Unfortunately as resources are limited not every treatment can be approved.”

Roz continues to petition the committee responsible for approving new medications to approve Elevidys in Israel so that Meitar’s treatment would be covered at no cost.

“You can’t put a price on someone’s head, because if I die in the war nobody else will fight for my son,” said Roz, explaining that his wife is herself registered disabled after suffering head injuries during her time in the IDF.

He performs his military duties “with a full heart because I know that I’m fighting for a just cause,” he said.

“It’s for my family and my people and my country,” he said. “If I die I will be complete with this decision because I understand the meaning of what I do in the military. I have a responsibility for my soldiers, and my soldiers have a responsibility for the civilians of Israel. But as far as I’m concerned, the state owes me this — and moreover, it owes it to my son.”

He describes Meitar as a “lovable child” who is “very funny and always smiling.” He loves to play with his dog and his 9-year-old sister Liri, who also struggles with the situation but who Roz describes as the “glue” in their family.

Meitar is “fully functional,” according to his father, “but he has a ticking clock above his head” as the treatment is thought to be most effective in younger patients.

He endures a grueling schedule of physiotherapy and other treatment each week to ensure he stays fit and mobile.

“He’s like a professional athlete but the difference is that one does it for fortune and fame, and the other does it to save his life,” said Roz.

But despite his engagement with the media — and his continued service in the military — Roz has received no response from the government. The Ministry did not respond to a request for comment from Jewish Insider.

“Every day I worry what will happen if something happens to me,” he said. “Because if I die even my life insurance won’t be enough to pay for it [the treatment].”

Thinking about what will happen if the government does not approve the treatment is bearing down on Roz.

“I could take the crowdfunding route and maybe I will have to eventually, but I’m scared to take this step because it’s a lot of money to recruit. Even if I sell my house, my parents’ house and my wife’s parents’ house, I still won’t get enough money.”

And Roz is also extremely mindful of others in his position.

“My son is not alone,” he said, referring to the 300 children who have the illness and the 15 eligible for the new medication.

Roz sees his military service, and his push to win approval for Elevidys, as part of the same fight. “My daughter asked me, ‘Daddy, why are you going to the army? You’re just one person, can’t the army give up on one person?’”

“I said to her in our family that doesn’t happen. If I don’t do it for everyone, no one else will do it, which is why I go to miluim,” using the Hebrew word for reserve duty.

Similarly, it would be “selfish” to just worry about his son, he said.

“It’s not us, it’s not our family. We believe in helping everyone, not just ourselves.”

He performs his military duties “with a full heart because I know that I’m fighting for a just cause,” he said.

“It’s for my family and my people and my country,” he said. “If I die I will be complete with this decision because I understand the meaning of what I do in the military. I have a responsibility for my soldiers, and my soldiers have a responsibility for the civilians of Israel. But as far as I’m concerned, the state owes me this — and moreover, it owes it to my son.”

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“He’s like a professional athlete but the difference is that one does it for fortune and fame, and the other does it to save his life,” said Roz.

But despite his engagement with the media — and his continued service in the military — Roz has received no response from the government. The Ministry did not respond to a request for comment from Jewish Insider.
Hillary Clinton, now a Columbia professor, decries campus antisemitism in Munich address

Clinton said her students are ‘woefully uninformed’ about antisemitism, the Holocaust and the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

By Gabby Deutch

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton decried antisemitism on U.S. college campuses on Saturday, telling an audience at the Munich Security Conference that young people in America are “woefully uninformed” about antisemitism and the Holocaust.

Clinton, now a professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, described an atmosphere in which students who are highly engaged on global issues only regularly protest Israel, despite a lack of knowledge about the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A series of recent events on campus exemplify the issue, Clinton said.

“Last week we had three panels about Ukraine, and they were superb. They went off without a hitch. We learned a lot and were challenged,” said Clinton. Two days later, the school hosted several panels about conflict-related sexual violence, with a focus on Ukraine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Israel. The conversation focused on Israel was protested.

“You just have to ask yourself how you could have an event focused on using rape as a tactic of war against women and girls, which is [used] in conflict across the world, and you include the most recent horrendous example out of Israel, and that brings out the protesters,” Clinton said. “There is an invidious strain of antisemitism that has never gone away, but we had hopes it had been, certainly, submerged, that has been poking its head up for quite some time now.”

Speaking alongside Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, Clinton offered a brief history of efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, noting that her students at Columbia have minimal knowledge of the history.

“What is so frustrating is that people have very little to no information about all of the efforts that were made, literally starting in 1948, but certainly moving most dramatically to the year 2000, to actually create a state for the Palestinian people,” said Clinton.

“I say that,” she continued, “because even when I’m teaching, with very smart students, and the students are from all over the world at the School of International and Public Affairs, they have no idea about any of this.”

Clinton laid out a list of events that she considered crucial context for understanding Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war — many of which she witnessed firsthand.

“They have no idea about the collapse of the peace process, the rise of an intifada. They have no idea about then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a man noted for his military experience, withdrawing from Gaza. They have no idea of Hamas’ takeover of Gaza. They have no idea that another Israeli prime minister back when I was secretary of state, namely [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu, was willing at least to keep talking about some kind of two-state solution process,” Clinton said.

It is the responsibility of educators, policymakers and the current generation of leaders to teach young people more about history, and in particular about the Holocaust, said Clinton, pointing to data that show young people know very little about the Holocaust.

“That’s our fault,” said Clinton. “The information they get, more often than not, is off of social media, where they are picking up not only misinformation but deliberate disinformation, that they are absorbing and acting on and not knowing even what they’re saying. So this is a problem that was really exposed on October 7, but we have to recognize it is a bigger problem even than that.”
As internal tourism rebounds, foreign visitors face hurdles getting to Israel

On Wednesday, United Airlines announced that it would resume flights to Israel starting in March

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Israel’s Tourism Minister Haim Katz and his ministry’s director general, Danny Shahar, addressed separate American audiences this week, urging Jewish and Christian supporters of Israel to resume their visits to the country even as the war in the Gaza Strip rages into a fifth month and rocket fire from Hezbollah in the north continues.

Katz arrived in the U.S. on Monday to address more than 4,000 Christian communicators at the National Religious Broadcasting Convention in Nashville, Tenn., while Shahar spoke to Jewish American leaders in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations’ annual meet-up in Jerusalem.

“What we are telling people is that if you want to support Israel then don’t just donate, come,” Peleg Lewi, the minister’s foreign affairs advisor, told Jewish Insider by phone on Tuesday. “Israel is now safe for tourists and visiting is the best way to support us.”

At the Conference of Presidents, Shahar’s message was similar, calling on American Jewish leaders to “come with your communities to visit Israel.”

“Your support for Israel takes on new validity and meaning in these difficult times,” Shahar said. “The tourism industry relies on the visits of our Jewish brothers and sisters from around the world, who are visiting Israel right now.”

Israel’s tourism sector was hit hard following Hamas’ Oct. 7 terror attack and the subsequent war in Gaza, with most international airlines immediately grounding their flights to Tel Aviv and the majority of the country’s 52,723 hotel rooms suddenly filled by evacuees from the Gaza periphery and the communities along the northern border.

Four months later, while Israel’s internal tourism is showing signs of rebounding, with nearly half the 88,000 evacuees placed in hotels returning home or moving to longer-term accommodations, foreign tourists are still refraining from visiting, largely due to the slow resumption of services by international airlines and the high prices charged by Israeli carriers.

Most international visitors come as part of solidarity missions, or for what has been dubbed “war tourism”; others arrive on religious pilgrimages to see holy sites in Jerusalem, Nazareth and the Galilee, which are beyond the danger zones.

Lewi, who accompanied Katz to Nashville, told JI that the idea that foreign tourism to Israel is totally dead “is completely wrong.” While it is true that the number of visitors dwindled from 15,000 tourists on Oct. 5 to only 26 on Oct. 8, the number of outside visitors has slowly been rising, reaching on average between 2,500 and 3,000 tourists per day.

“We expect these numbers to remain at these levels for the next few weeks or months until the fighting finishes,” he said, adding that the ministry is already doing outreach to convince tourists from Latin America and North America – traditionally the largest source of incoming tourism per year, accounting for almost a third of the total number of tourists – to return to Israel.

Despite the ministry’s goal of rebuilding the battered sector, the reluctance of low-cost airlines and, in particular major U.S. airlines, to resume flights to Israel combined with the exorbitant prices put in place by Israeli carrier El Al, remain a serious barrier.

On Wednesday, United Airlines confirmed it would resume daily nonstop flights from Newark, N.J., to Tel Aviv on March 6, phasing the route back into service beginning March 2. It said it aimed to add a second Newark flight as soon as May, and will reassess resuming routes from Washington, San Francisco and Chicago to Tel Aviv in the fall.

United CEO Scott Kirby wrote on a LinkedIn post on Wednesday that “Last year I indicated we’d be the first U.S. airline to resume flying to Israel and that time has come.”

The airline “conducted a detailed safety analysis in making this decision, including close work with security experts and government officials in the United States and Israel,” United said in a statement. “We also worked closely with the Air Line Pilots Association and the Association of Flight Attendants to develop the protocols to ensure they are safe and well-informed.”

“If there is one sector of the economy that is always hurt during these kind of confrontations, it is foreign tourism industry,” Michel Strawczynski, an economist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told JI. “While internal tourism is now doing quite well now, with Israelis coming back to activities and vacations and normal life, foreign tourism has still not returned,” he noted.
In response to a request for comment from JI, Delta said its flights would likely begin again at the end of April. American Airlines and Air Canada, both popular options for U.S. visitors, have still given no indication of when they will return. Turkish Airlines, which prior to Oct. 7 offered more than 10 daily flights from Istanbul to Tel Aviv and was also popular with U.S. travelers, has also not said if it will resume its service to Israel even after the war.

Lewi told JI that the grounding of U.S. carriers flying to Israel was one of the ministry’s biggest challenges. He explained that the internal decision-making process for the large airline companies was both hierarchical and slow, which was why it has taken so long to resume flights. In addition, the airlines face challenges dealing with the flight attendants’ union in the U.S., which is rigid when it comes to crew working hours and matters of insurance.

“Most European airlines found a solution with their unions and with the insurance,” Lewi said, pointing out how British Airways and Dutch carrier KLM, which is reportedly set to return to Israel in the next month, devised a plan to switch flight crews in nearby Cyprus so their staff would not exceed acceptable working hours.

“We have not been putting pressure on them to resume flying here,” said Lewi. “We believe that will be counter-effective, but they are losing money.”

Prior to Oct. 7, Israel’s foreign tourism was on track to reach some 3.9 million visitors in 2023, with figures before the war showing that 3.01 million tourists had entered the country, an increase of 12.5% over 2022, when 2.67 million visitors arrived. With the onset of fighting, however, the number of visitors plunged, with just 180,000 arriving in the last quarter of 2023. In January 2024, only 58,000 people entered the country, compared to 257,400 in January 2023.

“If there is one sector of the economy that is always hurt during these kinds of confrontations, it is foreign tourism industry,” Michel Strawczynski, an economist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told JI.

“While internal tourism is now doing quite well now, with Israelis coming back to activities and vacations and normal life, foreign tourism has still not returned,” he noted.

Strawczynski, who previously served as the director of the research department at the Bank of Israel, said that the main barrier was the refusal of the major American airlines to return their planes to Israel and the low-cost carriers, which are said to be resuming operations to Israel in the near future.

“Some of the airlines have come back but they are not operating at full capacity because this is one of the industries that is fully dependent on the duration of the war,” he said.

The months long pause in U.S.-based airlines flying to Israel has received little public attention in Washington, a marked difference from a previous round of conflict in 2014, when rockets struck near Ben Gurion Airport.

During that war, the Federal Aviation Administration imposed a temporary ban on U.S. airlines flying to and from Tel Aviv. Airlines also independently paused their flights to Ben Gurion.

Some lawmakers publicly advocated at the time for the ban to be lifted. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) accused the then-Obama administration of imposing an “economic boycott” of Israel, seeking political concessions from Israel. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY), now the Senate majority leader, also said that the FAA had overreacted.

A spokesperson for El Al told JI that due to the challenges of the ongoing war, the airline had been forced to adapt “to dynamic situations in both the operational and commercial realms” and that “the shift in consumer behavior since the war’s onset has prompted us to implement a stringent pricing strategy, all while maintaining a comprehensive flight schedule.”

During the current conflict, the FAA has urged U.S. airlines and pilots to “use caution” in Israeli airspace, issuing public guidance to that effect, but has not imposed any binding restrictions.

Israeli carrier El Al is one of the only lines that has flown continuously since the Oct. 7 terror attacks and during the first days of the war, the airline was one of the only options for Israelis returning home from abroad.

Previously owned by the Israeli government, El Al has worked to maintain its service and even made some concessions aimed at helping out during wartime – offering a special price for returning reserve soldiers – but without any direct competition, especially to the U.S., its ticket prices appear to have more than doubled the standard prices of the current winter season.

“El Al has made every effort to maintain their [schedules] and they’ve even added flights, but at the end of the day they are a commercial company,” said Lewi, adding that with the resumption of services to Europe, American travelers now have some alternative options that might bring down the cost of travel to Israel.

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The spokesperson added that travelers looking for “more favorable prices for future flights,” should book tickets further in advance. The company is slated to expand its operations, adding more than 50 weekly flights in response to increased demand, particularly for routes to and from the U.S., said the spokesperson.

Jewish Insider’s Capitol Hill reporter Marc Rod contributed reporting.
Saudi Arabia’s Future Investment Initiative lands in Miami

Speakers include Stephen Schwarzman of Blackstone, Mary Callahan Erdoes of JP Morgan and David Rubenstein of Carlyle

By Kelsey Warner

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Saudi Arabia’s Future Investment Initiative gabfest is taking the show on the road — landing in Miami tomorrow for the second annual edition of its Priority Summit.

The two-day agenda at the Faena Forum is expected to see about 800 executives, investors and policymakers meet around the theme “on the edge of a new frontier,” with a focus on investment opportunities and disruptive technologies.

“The world feels like an increasingly troubled place, with violent conflicts, cost of living crises, climate change, AI uncertainties, pandemic threats and other big problems,” Richard Attias, CEO of the FII Institute, told Arab News. “And so, it has never been more important to convene leaders from investment, business and government to address the root causes and come up with practical answers.”

The FII is a non-profit run by Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund. Other editions of FII’s Priority Summits have taken place in Hong Kong, London and New York. The events serve as a tee-up for the big “Davos in the Desert” conference, taking place each November at the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh.

Speakers include Stephen Schwarzman of Blackstone, Jenny Johnson of Franklin Templeton, Mary Callahan Erdoes of JP Morgan, David Rubenstein of Carlyle, Dina Powell McCormick of BDT & MSD Partners and Dell Technologies founder Michael Dell. Others exploring global economic trends, financial markets, and policy dynamics include Yasir Al-Rumayyan, Governor of the PIF and the Chairman of the FII Institute; Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud, Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the U.S.; and Khalid A. Al-Falih, the Saudi Minister of Investment. ♦
Miami’s FII summit opens with debate over AI investor risk

PIF’s Al-Rumayyan pitches Saudi Arabia as energy-rich hub for AI while Franklin Templeton’s Jenny Johnson advises heeding ‘The Terminator’

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

It took 14 minutes into the opening of Saudi Arabia’s showcase investor conference in Miami on Thursday for the enthusiasm around artificial intelligence to anchor itself at the center of debate.

Yasir Al-Rumayyan, Governor of the Public Investment Fund, which sponsored the Future Investment Initiative’s two-day Priority Summit, tackled it in the lead-off session, pitching the oil-rich desert kingdom as a natural hub for developing AI technology.

“Most of the people who are talking about this [aspect] of AI don’t mention one thing which is very important: energy,” said Al-Rumayyan, who is also Chairman of Saudi Aramco, the world’s largest energy company.

“AI would consume a lot of energy, and we are the global leader when it comes to fossil fuel energy and when it comes to renewable energy. So I think we are very well positioned to be an AI hub.”

The question was a natural for participants in the conference, a spin-off of the FII’s central annual event in Riyadh known as “Davos in the Desert,” which attracts some of the world’s most prominent investors. Many were avidly tracking Nvidia on their mobile phones after the Silicon Valley semiconductor giant’s shares jumped more than 9% on Wednesday following a glowing earnings forecast for its AI chips.

Blackstone Group CEO Steve Schwarzman, who followed Al-Rumayyan to the stage, flagged the risks presented to society, the economy and the labor market by AI.

“The people that I know who are on the cutting edge... are really cautious about this technology,” he said in the conference’s first panel discussion at Miami Beach’s Faena Hotel & Forum.

“In other words, they love it. It can do marvelous things. But unlike most of the business community, they are not against regulation. In fact, they’re pretty enthusiastic about regulation, because they see the downside. And they want those downsides to be addressed,” Schwarzman said.

Jenny Johnson, CEO of Franklin Templeton, an investment firm with $1.5 trillion in assets under management, reminded Schwarzman that AI’s downsides have been clear to Hollywood fans of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s avenging cyborg for decades.

“If you watch the movie “The Terminator,” it kind of scares you, but on the other hand, if we don’t create environments where the good folks are learning how to use AI, the bad guys become the experts on it,” Johnson said. “And so you have to... allow for innovation to happen.”

Also at the Miami summit over the two days are Palantir CEO Alex Karp, Honeywell’s Vimal Kapur, Google’s Caroline Yap, Affinity Partners’ Jared Kushner and two former U.S. Treasury chiefs – Liberty Strategic Capital’s Steve Mnuchin and ex-Harvard President Larry Summers. A talk by actress and Goop wellness guru Gwyneth Paltrow will close the conference on Friday.
New study finds that Jews who experience antisemitism, have strong Jewish identity are more likely to make charitable gifts

*The research, the first of its kind in 10 years, was conducted by the Ruderman Family Foundation and Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy*

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Jews who personally experience antisemitism were far more likely to donate to charity, particularly to religious charities, than those who have not, according to a new study of Jewish giving released on Tuesday by the Ruderman Family Foundation and the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, in partnership also with Giving USA.

According to the study, the first survey of its kind in 10 years, respondents who said they or someone in their household experienced antisemitism gave, on average, $35,425 to charity, compared to $3,726 by those who said no one in their household personally experienced antisemitism. The median amounts are less dramatic — $2,290 compared to $1,150 — but still indicate that experiencing antisemitism makes someone more likely to make charitable gifts of all kinds. The findings hold true when accounting for differences in Jewish engagement; that is to say, it is not that people who are more likely to experience antisemitism (those who are more visibly Jewish) are just more likely to be generous.

The white paper — “American Jewish Philanthropy 2022: Giving to Religious and Secular Causes in the U.S. and to Israel” — looks at philanthropic trends in the Jewish community from 2022, both comparing the giving trends of Jewish Americans to non-Jewish Americans and examining differences in charitable donations within the Jewish community. It is the first study of its kind since Jumpstart’s 2013 “National Study of American Jewish Giving.” The study was conducted by the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy’s Patrick M. Rooney and Jon Bergdoll, as well as Hanna Shaul Bar Nissim, who serves as deputy director U.S. at the Ruderman Family Foundation and as a visiting scholar at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

The survey found that Jewish households have at similar rates as non-Jewish households (74.3% compared to 72.3%) but gave larger amounts ($7,646 compared to $5,676). However, these differences disappeared once socioeconomic differences between Jewish and non-Jewish households were taken into account. Jewish households were also more likely to give to non-religious causes compared to non-Jewish households, but this difference also fades away “after controlling for income, wealth, educational attainment, and other socioeconomic factors,” the researchers found.

The most likely recipient of a Jewish household’s largest gift is a Jewish congregation. This was the case for 32% of respondents. The next most likely recipient is a charity that provides basic needs (15%), followed by healthcare or medical research (12%).

The differences within the Jewish community are more significant. How strongly people identify as Jews, if they are married to Jews, how frequently they attend synagogue services, how wealthy Jews are and if they are Ashkenazi or Sephardi all correlate with differences in giving in general and to Jewish or Israel-related causes in particular.

The study found that “strong identification” with Jewish identity is associated with increases in giving. This is true regardless of levels of religiosity and is true for all types of giving: total giving, donations to religious organizations, to non-religious organizations and to congregations.

Ashkenazi households were found to be the most likely to give, but Mizrahi households were found to give more than Ashkenazi households, both on average and in terms of median gifts. Mizrahi households were also more likely to give to Israel-related causes than Ashkenazi households.

The survey did not find a significant difference in levels of charitable donations between people who are married compared to those who are single. It did, however, find differences between households in which both partners are Jewish and interfaith households.

“Jewish survey respondents who have a Jewish partner are more likely to give and give more generously than respondents with a non-Jewish partner,” the researchers wrote. “This applies to all donations reported and to Jewish congregational giving. Additionally, Jewish households with children at home are more likely to give and give more generously than households without children at home.”

The researchers also found that households in which both partners are Jewish give to Israel-focused causes at
nearly five times the rate of interfaith households.

More than a quarter of Jewish households reported that they took part in volunteering. Of these, roughly half — 52% — said they volunteered for five hours per month or less, approximately a quarter volunteered between five and 10 hours a month and 23% volunteered more than 10 hours per month, approximately a quarter of whom volunteered more than 20 hours per month, according to the study.

The survey found that people who attend religious services at least monthly are more likely to volunteer in general and more likely to volunteer for more hours than those who attend services less frequently.

Breaking down the recipients of the donations, the researchers found that 25% of American Jewish households gave to Israel-focused organizations in 2022. (The survey did not look at data from the past year, when donations to Israel-focused organizations increased dramatically after the Oct. 7 terror attacks.)

The study found that the mean value of the donations was $2,467 and the median value was $400. The 2013 Jumpstart study found that 30% of American Jewish households gave to Israel-related organizations. This may represent a dip in donations to Israel-focused groups, but since the two studies are based on slightly different data sets, the researchers could not say definitively.

Of those who give to Israel-focused organizations, the most likely recipients of their donations are United States-based organizations that advocate on Israel-related policies.

The researchers did not find significant differences in giving between different denominations overall, but they did find that Orthodox and Conservative Jews donate a higher percentage of their gifts to Israel-focused organizations than Reform Jews.

Single men were also found to be “more likely to give and give more to Israel-focused organizations than single women or married couples.”

The study also found that those who cited “Jewish and community heritage” as being their primary reason for giving — over social reasons, altruistic reasons and to advance their viewpoint — are more likely to donate to Israel-focused organizations and to give a larger donation. Those who gave for altruistic reasons are also more likely to donate and to give more, but not necessarily to Israel-related causes.
The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Liz Berger, a social worker and mother of three in Philadelphia, had been looking for a push to return to school. Having converted to Judaism in 2018, Berger knew she wanted to use her education to support Jewish individuals and families who have made the journey from interfaith to Jewish conversion, especially in understanding antisemitism and their relationship to Zionism. When antisemitism skyrocketed nationally in the wake of Oct. 7, Berger decided the time was now to learn more about how converts could be a “vast and untapped resource” in the fight against Jewish hate. She said a new program at Gratz College, a Jewish college in the Philadelphia suburb of Melrose Park, Pa., comes at the perfect time.

Across the country, Bob Verissimo recently received a degree from Gratz College and is now going back for a second. A resident of Visalia in California’s Central Valley, an area with a tiny Jewish population, Verissimo said that “because of this, I feel a great responsibility to share the Jewish experience with as many people as I can, otherwise the residents here will only believe what they hear on television or through social media,” he continued. “With the massive upswing in antisemitism, especially the attacks of Oct. 7, I believe it is imperative to teach the world about the horrors of antisemitism in order to end this hate that has become endemic... If I were able to complete a second degree from Gratz, I feel that I would be a stronger ambassador for Gratz and the Jewish people as a whole.”

These are two of the newly accepted students of Gratz College’s online master’s degree in antisemitism studies program, a “first-of-its-kind interdisciplinary graduate program in the U.S.,” according to the Gratz website. With its first semester starting in the fall, the program will “prepare students for successful careers in Jewish community organizations, education, advocacy, government relations and public policy, among others,” the website says.

The program, which will run entirely online, offers a 36-credit degree, and students can either take 11 courses and a final project or 10 courses and a thesis. Courses will build “foundational knowledge of antisemitism and racism,” according to the website, and students will choose two of three possible concentrations: research, teaching and advocacy.

Courses will range from “Antisemitism & Applied Data Design: Surveys, Incident Reports, and Experiments” to “Confronting Modern Black-Jewish Relations: Mapping a Way Forward.”

The antisemitism studies program will be led by Ayal Feinberg, the director of the Center for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights at Gratz. “When Israel is engaged in a conflict, significantly higher rates of antisemitic hate crimes are reported,” Feinberg told eJewishPhilanthropy. “This is deeply challenging to Jewish communities and we’ve seen in the case of Europe a complete reassessment of whether Jews can actually remain in their communities that they’ve called home.”

Feinberg said he joined Gratz’s Holocaust center last year, leaving behind his prior work as a political science professor at Texas A&M because of “the feeling that Jewish studies needed to evolve.”

“We needed to focus more specifically on concerns related to antisemitism,” he continued. “When you ask anyone in the Jewish studies world where they go to learn about antisemitism, the answer was that there was no existing program until we created one where one can really develop a curated expertise on being an antisemitism expert.”

“Ayal’s vision was to scale from the Holocaust program and to build out something new in antisemitism studies,” Zev Eleff, the president of Gratz, told eJP. “It was approved by the faculty before Oct. 7 but sadly in the wake of Oct. 7 is an urgent need,” Eleff continued, noting that the program received dozens of inquiries even before officially opening registration. Three people have been enrolled so far.

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro applauded the new program in a statement. “Gratz College is already renowned for its Holocaust and Genocide Studies programs, and I am encouraged the college is expanding upon that work with a new Master’s degree in Antisemitism Studies,” he said. “I wish the faculty, staff, and especially the inaugural class of Antisemitism Studies students, great success in their work.”