Joe Lieberman, Conn. senator and first Jewish VP nominee, dead at 82

Lieberman won the adoration of the Jewish community during his 2000 vice-presidential campaign

By Gabby Deutch

Joe Lieberman, a former longtime Connecticut senator who made history as the first Jewish candidate on a major presidential ticket, igniting a surge of pride in the Jewish community, died on Wednesday. He was 82. He died of complications from a fall, according to his family.

An Orthodox Jew who observed stringent rules around kashrut and Shabbat, Lieberman didn’t compromise his religious observance during his political career. For rare Senate votes that occurred on Saturdays, Lieberman walked to the U.S. Capitol to cast a vote. He won the adoration and pride of the U.S. Jewish community in 2000 as the running mate to Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore, an election lost by several hundred votes in Florida. Many Jews backed his unsuccessful Democratic presidential primary campaign in 2004.

As the Democratic Party ticked leftward in the post-9/11 era, Lieberman began to find himself alienated from the party that fueled his political career. He served three terms in the Senate as a Democrat after first being elected in 1988. In 2006, he faced a Democratic primary opponent who challenged Lieberman — a foreign policy hawk — over his support for the Iraq war. Lieberman lost the primary but stayed in the race as an Independent, ultimately beating the Democrat to win his fourth and final term in office. Two years later, Lieberman endorsed his Republican colleague John McCain for president in 2008.

In recent years, Lieberman faced criticism from Democrats after becoming a prominent spokesperson for No Labels, the political organization that is seeking to field a third-party candidate in the 2024 presidential election. Last week, he wrote an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal arguing that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) “crossed a political red line” when he called for Israelis to replace Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Lieberman grew up in Stamford, Conn., the son of a liquor store owner. He attended Yale College and Yale Law School, and worked as a lawyer in Connecticut before
running for office. Lieberman was first elected in 1970 to the Connecticut state Senate. He won with help from a Yale Law volunteer named Bill Clinton. He served in the state Senate for 10 years before losing a congressional bid in 1980.

Throughout his career, his campaigns often relied on strong bipartisan support. When he ran for attorney general in 1982, he was endorsed by National Review editor William F. Buckley Jr., whom he met while a student at Yale. Both men had been editor of the Yale Daily News.

In the Senate, Lieberman developed strong foreign policy bona fides. Early in his career in Washington, he sided with President George H.W. Bush in voting to authorize the first Persian Gulf War. He helped establish the 9/11 Commission soon after the terrorist attacks and played a pivotal role in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

Lieberman spoke out clearly and eloquently on moral issues, saying: “We in government should look to religion as a partner, as I think the founders of our country did.” He famously denounced in 2000 the marketing of violent movies, music and video games to children. His national profile grew when he condemned former President Bill Clinton’s personal behavior as “wrong and unacceptable” and said he deserved “some measure of public rebuke and accountability.” But he voted against Clinton’s impeachment.

Throughout his career, Lieberman often drew upon his Jewish faith in his public remarks. He published a 2011 book, The Gift of Rest, making the case for the importance of the Sabbath.

“My Jewish faith is central to my life. I was raised in a religiously observant family. Given to me by my parents and formed by my rabbis, my faith has provided me with a foundation, an order, and a sense of purpose in my life,” Lieberman said in a 2011 speech at Brigham Young University. “It has much to do with the way I strive to navigate in a constructive way through every day, both personally and professionally, in ways that are large and small.”

Honoring survivors who gave testimonies, Steven Spielberg warns Jews again have to fight for ‘the very right to be Jewish’

The University of Southern California presents its University Medallion to the 52,000 Holocaust survivors who participated in the Shoah Foundation

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

OS ANGELES — Director and founder of the USC Shoah Foundation Steven Spielberg lamented that Jews “once again” have to fight for “the very right to be Jewish” amid rising antisemitism and extremism, including on college campuses, in a speech on Monday night at a ceremony honoring Holocaust survivors.

“The creation of the ‘other’ and the dehumanization of any group based on their differences are the foundations of fascism,” the Oscar-winning director said. “It’s an old playbook that has been dusted off and is being widely distributed today. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. And I am increasingly alarmed that we may be condemned to repeat history. So once again we have to fight for the very right to be Jewish in the face of brutality and persecution.”

Spielberg made the remarks at the University of Southern California, which awarded its University Medallion to the 52,000 Holocaust survivors who gave their testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation over the past 30 years, since Spielberg launched the initiative following the release of his award-winning film “Schindler’s List.” While all of the 52,000 survivors are the official recipients, the medal itself was presented by Spielberg, USC President Carol Folt and USC Shoah Foundation Chair Joel Citron to Celina Biniaz, one of the few living survivors whose lives were saved by Oskar Schindler.

In his address, Spielberg said the foundation, which has been collecting
testimony from survivors of the Oct. 7 terror attacks and other contemporary acts of antisemitism, is needed now more than ever.

“We have always been a resilient and compassionate people, who all understand the power of empathy,” Spielberg said. “We can rage against the heinous acts committed by the terrorists of Oct. 7 and also decry the killing of innocent women and children in Gaza. This makes us a unique force for good in the world and is why we are here today to celebrate the work of the Shoah Foundation, which is more crucial now than it even was in 1994. It is crucial in the wake of the horrific October 7 massacre. It is crucial to the stopping of political violence caused by misinformation, conspiracy theories and ignorance. It is crucial because stopping the rise of antisemitism and hate of any kind is critical to the health of our democratic republic and the future of democracy all over the civilized world.”

The director added that “the machinery of extremism is being used on college campuses.”

More than 250 people — including the foundation’s partners from USC, the Los Angeles community and around the globe — attended the event, roughly 30 of them Holocaust survivors and their families.

Accepting the medallion, Biniaz called on the audience to resist the “corrosive power of hatred” and said she hoped that personal testimonies can help in that effort.

“I believe the human voice speaks louder than history books,” Biniaz said. “I believe that personal experiences can inspire others to value human beings. Today, we’re living in a world that was shaped by tremendous divisions and horrible violence. We see a triumphant return of the same kind of antisemitism I experienced both before and after the war in Europe. We must never give in to the corrosive power of hatred. And we must always remember the power each individual has to transform the lives of others.”

The university has only given this award three times in its history: to publisher, broadcaster, diplomat and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994; to philanthropists David and Dana Dornsife in 2011; and Annenberg’s daughter, Wallis, who serves as president and chairman of the Annenberg Foundation, in 2017.

The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation was founded in 1994, and in 2006 became part of USC. To date, it has recorded more than 50,000 interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust, and in recent years it has begun collecting testimonies of victims of contemporary antisemitism as part of an organizational shift toward combating antisemitism and not only preserving the memory of the Holocaust, according to Robert Williams, the executive director of the Shoah Foundation.

Earlier this month, the foundation made its entire collection available for free to everyone in Israel through a partnership with the National Library of Israel. Williams told eJP that the goal is to make its collection available across the globe within a year.

Since October, the foundation has collected 400 testimonies of the atrocities witnessed by the survivors of the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas, making more than 200 available on their website so far.

Williams told eJP that collecting the Oct. 7 testimonies was made possible by a challenge grant, issued by Citron, drawing the support from board members and key supporters who have asked to remain anonymous at this time. Fundraising is underway for the second phase of this testimonies project, which is to do the indexing, tagging and translating of the accounts to make them more easily searchable. Fundraising for the third and final stage, he added, will support the second set of interviews from the survivors, and all told, testimony efforts — including those focused on anti-Semitism since the Holocaust, or filling out the Holocaust-focused collection over the next few years — will cost “many millions of dollars.”

Even with the foundation’s extensive experience taking survivor testimonies, the Oct. 7 testimonies presented some new challenges. “Taking a large number of testimonies at scale is something the organization has not really had to do for about 25 years,” Williams said. “But it was possible because we have a very large and very, very skilled technology team. We have strong partnerships, including some very strong partnerships in Israel. So we had people who were able to go on the ground within eight days to start taking these testimonies.”

The tools and methods used to take the testimonies have also evolved with the times, Williams said, with streaming technology, artificial intelligence and other newer techniques making the collection of digital, high-resolution testimony easier.

The goal is to index the testimonies so that people can find targeted information via detailed searches.

“If you need somebody who was a witness to the destruction of the police station in Sderot, you’ll be able to do that search,” Williams said, adding that the foundation hopes the information will be useful “to international lawyers or people trying to obtain some sense of justice for the victims of that day.”

Because the foundation team understood that traumatic recollections may shift as time goes on, and, Williams said, the plan to document Oct. 7 includes returning to the survivors in several years’ time, to assess how they are processing trauma as they rebuild their lives.

“We exist, for lack of a better description, to try to realize the world that Holocaust survivors envisioned and undoubtedly many survivors hoped for: a world without genocide,” Williams told eJP, adding that the rise of antisemitism has renewed the foundation’s focus toward “bring[ing] about a world where antisemitism returns to the dark recesses where it belongs...we’re doing this out of obligation to the survivors because they weren’t unfortunately able to experience that world for themselves.”
AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr to retire at end of year

The longtime chief executive built AIPAC into an influential lobbying and political entity over nearly 30 years in the role

By Gabby Deutch

Howard Kohr, the longtime chief executive of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, will retire at the end of the year after nearly 30 years atop the influential pro-Israel organization.

The announcement, which AIPAC shared with members this afternoon, comes as the organization gears up to spend tens of millions of dollars on congressional races this year. That AIPAC is now playing a major, direct role in elections is a result of a massive strategic shift that Kohr and co-CEO Richard Fishman, who died in October, oversaw in recent years, moving the organization away from grassroots bipartisan lobbying and toward political spending.

“We are the tip of the spear for driving vital pro-Israel policies in Congress and ensuring America stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel. We are building the political strength to stand firmly with our allies and defeat our detractors,” Kohr said in an email to AIPAC members, which was obtained by Jewish Insider.

Kohr’s tenure at AIPAC has included several key moments in the U.S.-Israel alliance, including the completion of a 10-year funding package approved by Congress in 2016 and the decision by the Trump administration to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In recent months, the group has lobbied Congress to pass $14.3 billion in supplemental security assistance to Israel.

Kohr’s years at the helm of AIPAC also coincided with growing partisanship in Washington. AIPAC has always worked closely with both Democrats and Republicans, but building broad bipartisan consensus on legislative priorities became more difficult in recent years.

In 2015, AIPAC offered its support to congressional Republicans who invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress over the objections of their Democratic colleagues, who were frustrated that then-President Barack Obama had not been consulted.

AIPAC also lobbied strongly against the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which was championed by the Obama administration — and dismantled by former President Donald Trump. After the 2018 election of the four far-left lawmakers known as “the Squad,” AIPAC turned its attention toward countering hostility toward Israel among a small but outspoken faction in the Democratic Party.

Under Kohr, AIPAC built up its grassroots arm, hosting annual policy conferences with upwards of 20,000 people. After the 2020 policy conference, AIPAC canceled the decades-old event and shifted its focus to political fundraising — a major change for an organization that previously spurned partisan politics and did not give money directly to candidates.

In 2022, AIPAC’s first year operating a political action committee and an affiliated Super PAC, the organization spent heavily in several Democratic primaries, seeking to defeat progressives in favor of moderate pro-Israel Democrats. AIPAC issued hundreds of endorsements of both Democrats and Republicans. The group faced criticism for its support of more than 100 Republicans who had voted not to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election. Kohr held the line that Israel is the only issue AIPAC considers when making endorsements, telling The Washington Post in 2022 that “We’re not trying to constrict the community.”

Kohr said in his Tuesday email that he and Fishman planned to announce their retirement at the end of this year in October, but the announcement was pushed back after the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel and Fishman’s death.

AIPAC’s board will tap a search committee to identify a successor to Kohr, who joined AIPAC in 1987 and became executive director in 1996. He previously worked at the Republican Jewish Coalition and the American Jewish Committee.” ♦
The ongoing political debate over whether and how to conscript Haredi men into the IDF is shaping up to be a far more likely catalyst for an early election in Israel than the government's policies relating to the war in Gaza.

Israel's government is careening towards a deadline to pass a law on the matter or send conscription notices to Haredi men. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has thus far followed his usual political instinct to satisfy his Haredi coalition partners Shas and United Torah Judaism, but may not have the votes to keep the disparate parts of his government together for long.

Netanyahu is in the awkward position of having to choose between embracing a very unpopular policy to keep his coalition together, or doing what most of his voters want while destabilizing his coalition and potentially launching an early election.

The Haredi enlistment exemption has been highly controversial in Israel for decades. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, agreed not to conscript 400 Haredi yeshiva students in the early years of the state, but after their ranks multiplied over a half-century, the Supreme Court determined in 1999 that the unofficial exemption was illegal. That spurred the Knesset to pass the Tal Law in 2002, exempting full-time yeshiva students from IDF service. Yet, in 2012, the Supreme Court declared that law unconstitutional.

Since then, the issue of Haredi enlistment has been front and center on the Israeli political agenda. A Netanyahu-led government with now-Opposition Leader Yair Lapid as finance minister and without Haredi parties passed legislation in 2014, setting annual Haredi conscription quotas and cutting funding to yeshivas who don’t meet them – but an election held the following year brought into the coalition the Haredim, who promptly gutted the law.

One of the issues that led to the downfall of Netanyahu's coalition in late 2018 was disagreements between Haredi parties and then-Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman over conscription. The frequent elections in subsequent years – five between 2019 and 2022 – gave the Supreme Court little choice but to allow the deferral of passing a new law, but the judges in Jerusalem have run out of patience.

The court's order for the government to end the inequality in IDF conscription coincided with the Defense Ministry announcing that, given the acute need for more manpower in the war in Gaza, it needs to extend the service of active duty and reserve soldiers and start to call up students in the middle of their pre-army programs, making support for the Haredi exemption even more politically treacherous.

The law allowing the IDF to exempt 66,000 Haredi men from serving last year – a record high – expires on March 31; after that, the military will have to start sending conscription letters to Haredim.

Netanyahu's proposed solution was still under negotiation with Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara on Tuesday morning, postponing a planned cabinet vote on Tuesday – the day before the government's deadline to give an answer to the Supreme Court in petitions against the current enlistment exemption. The proposal is similar to the 2013 law in that it backs a bill setting increasing annual quotas for recruiting Haredi yeshiva students, while reducing funding for yeshivas that do not meet the targets.

It also instructs the IDF not to conscript full-time yeshiva students while the new law is being legislated. The proposal sets a schedule for passing the law: Draft legislation would have to be submitted to the Knesset by May 22, and would have to pass a final vote by June 30 or the IDF could conscript Haredim.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who is in Washington this week, and war cabinet Minister Benny Gantz oppose the bill, but Netanyahu has enough votes in his cabinet for it to pass. The cabinet decision would allow him to stave off any political fallout from the Haredi conscription issue for three months.

Whether a majority of the Knesset would support the bill, and whether the legislature could pass such a controversial law in the short timeline laid out in Netanyahu's proposal, remains to be seen.

With the departure of Gideon Sa'ar and the three other lawmakers in his New Hope party on Monday, Netanyahu's emergency coalition currently has 72 out of 120 members of Knesset: 64 from his prewar religious-right alliance and eight from Gantz's National Union party.

A vote on a Haredi enlistment exemption would not get Gantz's support and would likely be an opportunity for him to leave the coalition even if the war does not end by then. Some in Likud have voiced concerns about a continued exemption, along with leading figures in coalition parties to the right of Likud, which could prolong the legislative process.
If the law doesn’t pass, conscription letters will be sent and yeshiva funding will be slashed, and the Haredi parties will almost certainly leave the coalition.

More than three-quarters (76%) of Israelis support Haredi conscription, according to a survey conducted by Mano Geva for the organization Pnima, which seeks to bridge divisions in Israeli society. The vast majority of Gantz voters – 89% – support enlisting Haredim in the IDF. Most Likud voters (56%), and even more Religious Zionist Party voters (60%) support it, as do significant numbers of voters for other coalition parties: Otzma Yehudit (48%), United Torah Judaism (33.4%), and Shas (40.5%).

March 25, 2024

Trump to Israel: ‘You’re losing a lot of the world’

Formal President Donald Trump warned Israel that it is losing global support as it continues its war against Hamas in a wide-ranging interview with right-wing Israeli daily Israel Hayom. The former president used the interview to cast himself as a strong friend of Israel — and said President Joe Biden “supports the enemy.”

“I have to be very careful, because you’re losing a lot of the world, you’re losing a lot of support, you have to finish up, you have to get the job done,” Trump said.

Trump’s comments bear similarities to language used by Biden administration officials in recent days, even as Trump’s backers in Congress have argued that the former president would be a stronger supporter of Israel than Biden. Last week, a meeting in Israel with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Secretary of State Tony Blinken cautioned Israel that a major ground operation in Rafah “risks further isolating Israel around the world and jeopardizing its long-term security and standing.”

Speaking to Israel Hayom reporters at Mar-a-Lago, Trump praised Israel’s response to the terror attacks that killed more than 1,200 people, saying “I would act very much the same way as you did. You would have to be crazy not to.”

But he also suggested that Israel has gone too far in its campaign against Hamas in Gaza since the Oct. 7 terror attacks.

“I think Israel made a very big mistake. I wanted to call [Israel] and say don’t do it. These photos and shots. I mean, moving shots of bombs being dropped into buildings in Gaza. And I said, Oh, that’s a terrible portrait. It’s a very bad picture for the world,” Trump said of imagery released by the IDF over the course of the war. “I think Israel wanted to show that it’s tough, but sometimes you shouldn’t be doing that.”

He blasted Israel’s handling of the public relations aspect of the war, stating that “Israel has to get better with the promotional and with the public relations, because right now they’re in ruin.”

Despite his criticism of Israel’s war effort, Trump cast himself in stark opposition to Biden, arguing that not only is he more supportive of Israel, but that Biden is at fault for the Oct. 7 attacks.

“It [Oct. 7] was an attack that I blame on Biden because they [Hamas] have no respect for him. He can’t put two sentences together. He can’t talk. He’s a very dumb person,” said Trump. He repeated a claim he has made several times since October, claiming that “they [Hamas] would have never done that attack if I were there.”

Bidentravelled to Israel a week and a half after the attack to meet with Israeli leaders and survivors of the terror attack, pledging U.S. support for Israel’s quest to eradicate Hamas and bring home the hostages. Since then, the White House’s support for Israel has grown more complicated, with sharp disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem on issues including the looming IDF operation in Rafah.

Biden and Netanyahu “haven’t in the past agreed on everything and they don’t agree on everything right now. But they both agree on one really important thing, and that is the importance of the State of Israel,” White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

“Biden is not a friend of Israel. Because if Biden was a friend of Israel, October 7 would have never happened,” Trump told Israel Hayom. “Forget about what happened after October 7. October 7 would have never happened if you had a friend named Biden, because if you had the proper president, that would have never happened.”
Doron Krakow reflects on seven chaotic years steering the JCC Association

In a wide-ranging interview, the outgoing president and CEO of the JCC Association says the organization is transitioning from a trade group to a movement and building its relationship with philanthropy

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

For the past seven years, Doron Krakow has led the Jewish Community Center Association of North America — through a rash of bomb threats, a pandemic and the post-Oct. 7 rise of both antisemitism and Jewish interest in Israel and Judaism — as he sought to change the organization from what he describes as a “trade association” into a coherent movement built on common principles and goals.

Last Monday, Krakow announced that he was stepping down as president and CEO of the organization. For most of the past five months, Krakow has been living in Israel, helping his daughter-in-law care for his grandson as his son, Daniel, has been serving in the Israel Defense Forces as a reservist in the war against Hamas in Gaza. While he continued serving as president and CEO of the association during that time, he determined that beyond the logistical difficulties of leading a North American organization from abroad, he began to feel more connected to and interested in the challenges facing Israel at this time.

Krakow sat down with eJewishPhilanthropy on the sidelines of the Jewish Funds Network conference in Tel Aviv for a wide-ranging discussion about his seven-year, crises-filled tenure at the JCC Association, the role that JCCs can play in strengthening the Jewish community, early childhood education and how to build a movement with all carrots and not sticks.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Judah Ari Gross: How, why and when did you make the decision to step down?

Doron Krakow: I came to Israel in August ahead of the birth of my first grandson. My wife and I returned to the States on October 6th after staying through the Chagim to be with the kids. Both my daughter-in-law and my son don’t have any immediate family here. We went home on the 6th. By midday on the 7th, [my son] Aaron had been recalled to active duty. That night he was already in Kfar Aza. By noon on the 8th, I got on a plane to come back. The baby was seven weeks old. And the prospect of having [my daughter-in-law and grandson] by themselves while Aaron was in a bad place was unthinkable for me. So I was here essentially until the end of January. I went back to the States for business meetings two days before his unit rotated out of Gaza — to our great relief. But when I went back [to the U.S.] in January, I assumed it was temporary.

I went back to the intensive evolving work of the JCC field contending with its latest crisis, which is the post-Oct. 7 rise in antisemitism and the challenges of running a big tent Jewish communal entity. I threw myself back into the work but began feeling that my heart is here. That even though my son is at this point not on active duty, my desire for my wife and I to be more supportive of him and his family at this time felt increasingly significant. And though I continue to love the work and love the JCC field and feel as if we’ve made remarkable progress as an agency and a movement over the last seven years, the time had come for me to be able to devote myself more completely to Israel.

JAG: Was the time that you were here, I mean how was that for you, how was that being here, working from here, how was that sort of received in terms of you being here?

DK: I couldn’t imagine a more supportive board nor a more supportive staff. They understood my need to be here and they gave me every conceivable latitude. There’s a difference being far away versus being in the field. I felt that great distance from my constituents and I can’t help but imagine that they felt some distance from me.

At the same time I tried very hard to use my time here to be an effective representative of the North American Jewish community. So I was very active in, I’ll call it a solidarity presence or a solidarity orientation. I tried to be physically present in places from the otef [Gaza border region] to the north. I tried to make sure that where it was possible for the JCC Movement to have voice and representation in support of the challenges that were taking place here that I wanted to be physically present. We have a wonderful office in Israel headed by Leah Garber and we began working on initiatives that would enable us to bring the field closer to the events that were happening here and vice versa.

And I tried to make myself as big a presence by way of Zoom at board meetings and staff functions of JCCs as I could. I learned very quickly the reality of being a North American staff person working out of Israel, which is that the work days are 16 to 20 hours long every day. I had my Israeli workday and then from 3 p.m. till midnight or up to 2 o’clock in the morning, that was
the other half of the day. I felt very usefully engaged, but at the same time a little inadequate to the work.

Being the leader of a movement with 172 locations has for me over the course of seven years always meant spending a lot of time in the field. And so the distance simply was challenging.

When I went back and renewed my work with the field and with the staff and with the board, I was already asking questions about whether continuing to do the work in the way I knew it needed to be done was consistent with where I needed to be personally and professionally. And I entered into some long conversations with David Wax, the chair of my board, with Jen Mamlet, who's been my right hand since 2018. And it became increasingly clear that I had come to a fork in the road, and if I was going to undertake a change, doing so sooner as opposed to later would allow the agency and the leadership to chart the course forward in a way that they believe is fundamentally in the best interest of the agency in the field.

It would allow me to return to Israel sooner so that I could be closer to my family. And though I haven't materially begun thinking about what my next professional role is going to be, I'm looking at it through the lens of knowing that I need to be anchored here and that the work needs to be anchored in Israel and with issues that I believe are growing out of the conflict that began on Oct. 7. It seems to me that both challenges and opportunities are going to grow immeasurably in the coming weeks and months, and I'll be looking to find the way in which I can make the most substantive contribution here.

JAG: How do you see the JCC system today, especially as it relates to Israel? I have noticed that you and the JCC Association have put forward the issues of Israel and Jewish peoplehood. But different Jewish communities are in different places on the topic of Israel, and there are some communal leaders who want to bring the issue forward and others that don't, who would rather avoid the politics and the differences of opinion altogether. Full disclosure: My mother is a former employee of the JCC in Asheville, N.C., who left her position over how the organization responded to some incidents revolving around Oct. 7 and more generally how it handles the topics of Israel and Zionism.

DK: Let me start by anchoring what I'm going to say with this: Just in the six weeks following Dec. 14, 118 JCCs hosted solidarity programs attended by more than 40,000 people. That's a large majority when there are 172 JCCs. I'm not sure there's any other sector in North American Jewish life that can make that claim. The JCC field has risen largely to the occasion of demonstrating its solidarity with Israel and leaning into the challenges that it's facing when it comes to rapidly rising antisemitism in the United States and Canada.

Now let me backtrack a bit. I came to this job seven years ago because I believe that in a period of alarmingly quick declines in participation in Jewish life, the JCCs — which have far and away the largest engagement with the most diverse population of Jews — offer the single most significant opportunity we have to move the needle. If JCCs could be enjoined to the idea that they have significant responsibility for greater Jewish community and measurable Jewish outcomes, they alone have size, scope and scale that would allow us to feel that there's great potential there. And I came into this job believing fundamentally that engagement with Israel is a cornerstone of Jewish community and Jewish life no matter where you choose to live. And in my view the North American Jewish community has been woefully underperforming in making Israel an affirmative part of Jewish identity and Jewish life.

So I was committed to bringing that ethos into the work in the JCC field. We have increased what I would call the level and volume of Israel engagement programming, and basically in every instance the field has not resisted. I would make the argument that the field was never opposed to being more committed and engaged to Israel, but because of the very razor thin margins on which JCC businesses operate, the embrace required them to do it in a way that would not result in compromises to the business.

That is why the marriage with great philanthropy was to me the intoxicating allure: We have constituencies in scale; they have resources. They're interested in strategic Jewish outcomes. We're interested in strategic Jewish outcomes. And in the last seven years we've increased our engagement with philanthropy tenfold. We started small, but tenfold is a lot, particularly since great philanthropy doesn't tend to move in lightning quick strides. So we're on the road to doing that.

My headline for the field is to the degree to which we can ease or incentivize their work on Jewish outcomes and on engagement with Israel, the field is generally open and receptive, and I can give you any number of instances that are stellar examples of progress.

All of that having been said, the 'big tent' notion of Jewish Community Center life, coupled with the fact that the North American Jewish community is disproportionately not Orthodox and therefore disproportionately tilts liberal or progressive, has them having to wrestle now with a long-standing commitment to universalist causes that are consistent with the ethos of Jewish community and the increasingly particularistic needs of a Jewish community under duress. And it's a wrestling match. And each JCC in its own way is trying now to figure out how to wrestle their way through it. For some, it's very easy. For others, it's much more complicated.

JCCs are trying now to juxtapose the fact that they, by and large, are the single place that sees more expatriate Israelis than any institution in Jewish life, with the fact that the Israelis would like to see a much firmer and stronger stance on the part of JCCs than they're seeing in some cases. That is a constructive tension as far as I'm concerned. For good or ill, until Oct. 6, we believed we were living in a society that embraced a Jewish community and Jewish life, so it's a major shock to suddenly find that the world you thought you were living in doesn't quite look and feel the way you thought that it did.

And these are not institutions that are typically subject to rapid change and shock.
They are evolutionary institutions. And we're now confronted by a sudden, shocking change in the environment for Jews in many Jewish communities in Canada and the United States, with a long-standing, gradualist approach to the evolution of the institution.

What we talked about when I gathered with 150 of the senior-most leaders in Denver at the beginning of February was the need to be more than simply successful operators of a continuing institution, but to rise to the moment required of us at a time of war in Israel and great strain on the North American Jewish community, and to embrace the fact that we're going to have to wrestle our way through it.

There isn't a five-point plan that if everybody adopts, that's how we do it because every community is quite different. Engaging this challenge and opening ourselves to the hard conversations that are going to take place means committing ourselves to the idea that we need to create far greater literacy about Israel and Jewish life on the part of our staff, on the part of our boards and on the part of the members and users of the JCC. It is a great opportunity, but it's a really big lift. It will require resources, and it will require time, and it will require a readiness to take the slings and arrows that are going to come with it. And so we at the association are committed to bringing extraordinary resources to bear.

But are JCCs having to look at where they are with regard to their commitment to and engagement with Israel and hold it up to the light of day and affirm where they're going to be? The answer is yes, and they should be.

JAG: How do you see the position of the movement more generally, after the bomb threats, the COVID crisis and where we are today? You mentioned increasing engagement with philanthropy.

DK: So let me offer a few things. First of all, at the time that I arrived at the association, of the 172 JCCs [in North America], only 111 were affiliated, and the number was dropping. Today, 160 are affiliated and the ones beyond the 160 are in most cases such small communities that it’s a matter of lacking time and energy, not that they’re not open to the idea.

I would like to argue that that’s a function of several things. For one, I think the association’s done a good job of bringing back entities that had at one time or another been part of our system and drifted away. Crisis brings people together. So when the bomb threats hit, we canceled the policy that said if you’re not a dues payer, we’re not interested in supporting you. We said, ‘It’s a security crisis. We support every JCC irrespective of whether you’re a dues payer or not.’

When COVID hit, we suspended the dues entirely because there was a financial crisis. JCCs operate on the basis of a revenue model that depends 80% on the users. We again said that whether or not you were a dues payer, you get every service that we offer.

We turned to philanthropy to pay our bills and when we resumed dues, we resumed them voluntarily, which is where they stand still to this day. It’s not a panacea. But it allowed us to cast the net wide and our belief — the board and my staff — was that if we want to impact the trajectory of Jewish life in North America, we can’t afford not to work with every institution in our network. We’re not interested only in enhancing Jewish life in some communities. We’re interested in everywhere.

Secondly, the JCC Association that I inherited had a reputation of not working and playing nicely with philanthropists outside of the circle of those who were on the board.

JAG: Where do you think that reputation came from?

DK: First of all, it had evolved as a great trade association, which meant that when it needed more revenue, typically it raised the membership dues. But that model has faded. Also, I think there was enough ‘firepower’ on the board that for some very materially creative and significant programmatic initiatives, they turned inward. So you had Mandel and the Jacobs family from San Diego and the Sidman-Leventhal family from Boston and the Kaplan family from D.C. There were some very serious people on the board, but it was insular. And when we reintroduced ourselves to the philanthropic community, it didn’t have any ‘muscle memory’ for working with us. And the memories they did have were that their interactions with us were not terribly fulfilling. So we said, well, let’s begin again.

And what I presented to them was the opportunity: 172 JCCs that welcome a million and a half in-person visitors a week, a million of them Jews of every age background. There is no bigger opportunity, and therefore the chance to partner with us and to bring your strategic agenda to bear on our platform offers a great opportunity. So around early childhood engagement and family, around scholarships to bring more families into overnight and day camp programs, around JCC Maccabi, which is a unique peoplehood engine, around the recruitment of chaplains for the United States Armed Forces, around the engagement of military families.

There have been a large number of very aspirational programs that have also served as the testing ground for demonstrating the viability of philanthropic investment across our platform.

Marshall Levin is the chief philanthropic officer of JCC Association. He used to be the head of the American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science; they were raising $100 million a year. He came to work with us because he came to believe the vision that we have for a dramatically larger collaboration with philanthropy is the huge opportunity that we’re describing it as, and with him came reputation and credibility. We have become a board that almost never gets turned down by a candidate that we’d like to add.

We have added some extraordinary people, including another attendee here [at the Jewish Funders Network conference], Sandy Cardin, who came on to our board in 2022, and has played an important role in guidance and in this philanthropic connectivity agenda of ours. I think we are primed for the next move.
JAG: One area of JCC-philanthropy cooperation that we at eJP have written about is the ElevatEd program, which looks to address the shortage of qualified early childhood education teachers. Why is that such a focus for the JCC Association?

DK: I would say a few things about early childhood education. Number one, it is the preeminent gateway for the engagement of Jewish families with young children. Those who put their kids in a Jewish framework are in the hands of the Jewish community, and it's on the Jewish community to keep them. Those who choose a non-Jewish framework are at risk of going into what I would call 'Jewish witness protection.' They disappear until such time as they choose to be identified. So our ability to capture the maximum number of those kids is a critical lever in the sustained engagement of their families.

And there are thousands of families on our waiting list as a field. We've got Jewish families with young children banging on the doors trying to get in, and there's no room at the end. And our problem is not an insufficient volume of classroom space — the problem is teachers. So ElevatEd grew out of work that Rick Jacobs [president of the Union for Reform Judaism] and I were doing in parallel on how to strengthen Jewish early childhood education. We saw a problem that we shared and we decided we'd go into business together to try to change it. And we have done so with the partnership of three mega foundations: the Jim Joseph Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, and the Samuels Foundation out of Houston.

At the end of the day, [the teacher shortage] is only a matter of money, which is something for which we have a substantial supply. Very often the organized Jewish community spends time and huge investment trying to create demand for things that people don't seem to be asking for. Here we're talking about a thing that people are desperately in pursuit of, and it's only a matter of our being able to create a matter of supply.

JAG: Looking back at your time at the organization, are there things that you wish you had done or wish you'd started sooner?

DK: One, I would have liked some regular years to pursue the strategic agenda that we've been working on and not to constantly be trying to manage it in whatever the crisis of that particular moment was. I've worked in the Jewish community for more than thirty years. I have never experienced a period like these last seven years. I don't know that we had any crises that rose to the level of each of these crises in the last seven years. So I would have liked some more regular time to be a builder.

Two, I wish I had been more successful at animating great philanthropy more quickly. I conclude my seven years thinking that I could have done better on making this match more self-evident and on impressing more on the great foundation leaders to see the opportunity that I see here.

And three, the JCC Association has been a trade association through most of its history. And I have endeavored to help ease it into becoming more of a movement. We've made progress. To go from 111 and declining to 160 and growing is, I think, remarkable. But there's strengthening the participation in a community, and then there's creating a sense of alignment where the balance between local good and greater good tilts more towards the latter over time. I think we've made some progress, but I would like to have made more progress.

JAG: Is there a way to enforce that movement mentality, to say, 'We have our red lines, and if you cross them, you're out of the movement'?

DK: In a heartbeat.

DJ: Unlike Hillel, we haven't owned the trademark, so anybody could become a JCC.

At the end of the day, that pursuit should happen along two paths. The less complicated path is: the more resources we bring to the field, the more leverage we have with the field. The more we're able to put out in the field, the more we can incentivize the field to lean into things that we want them to do. The marriage with great philanthropy comes with that as a dividend. We're able to fund great programs, but we're also able to get a field that is ambivalent about how interested they are to say, 'Well, that money could be really important, so yeah, we'd be willing to do that' Or, 'I've always wanted to do more Jewish things, but I can't afford to do it without that kind of outside help, and my community is not supportive.'

The other way is the way that appeals more to me, which is through the power of effective persuasion by providing a vision and being an effective articulator of something greater that people simply are drawn to. And that has been my approach in these seven years.

I came to the association having never worked at a JCC, but I saw something in them that I'm not sure that they saw themselves. So I do think that the increased embrace of Israel was in no small part reflective of a readiness to see something that they hadn't previously seen. But I didn't get as far as I would have liked.

I leave it to Jen, and she's in a really good position to carry the baton forward. She's a true believer in the mission and the ideas. She is a brilliant fundraiser and a remarkable communicator. I've worked with a lot of people in my career. I have never worked with a more formidable or more capable partner than I have with her.

JAG: Is she your preferred candidate for your permanent successor?

DK: In a heartbeat.
Israel concerned that other countries will follow Canada’s lead on arms sale ban

Canada does not sell weapons to Israel, but the announcement of a halt in military exports in a time of tensions between Ottawa and Jerusalem, could lend legitimacy to such a move in other countries

By Lahav Harkov

Concern is rising in Jerusalem following Ottawa’s announcement of a ban on military exports from Canada to Israel, despite its minimal direct impact on Israel’s ability to defend itself, stoking fears that the decision sets a precedent that more significant trading partners could follow.

Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly told The Toronto Star on Tuesday that Ottawa will ban future arms exports to Israel, even though a motion to that effect passed by the Canadian legislature earlier in the week was not binding.

According to the motion, Canada would “cease the further authorization and transfer of arms exports to Israel to ensure compliance with Canada’s arms export regime and increase efforts to stop the illegal trade of arms, including to Hamas.” Though the motion only mentions arms, Joly’s office reportedly said the ban will include all military goods and technology.

The motion proposed by the left-wing New Democratic Party also called for the “establishment of the State of Palestine as part of a negotiated two-state solution.” It originally called to unilaterally recognize a Palestinian state, but Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s Liberals negotiated to soften the text.

The move came days after reports that Canada had stopped exporting military goods to Israel on January 8 in order to examine whether there was a “substantial risk” that the IDF was committing human rights violations.

The impact of the ban on Israel’s defense is likely “zero to negative,” former Canadian Ambassador to Israel Vivian Bercovici told Jewish Insider.

“To my knowledge, there’s no there there. Canada doesn’t even have basic equipment for our own army,” she said. “We don’t produce much, if anything, in the way of military arms.”

The items Israel orders from Canada are “things like canvas tents,” that have military and civilian uses, Bercovici said. She noted that many recent media reports mentioned an order of three to six light armored vehicles from Canada that Israel canceled early in the war, if not before.

Ottawa approved CAD 70 million ($52 million) in military export permits to Israel in the first three months since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, but most of it – CAD 47 million ($35 million) – would not have fallen under the the ban, because it consists of goods modified by Israel and then sent back to the Canadian Forces or other Canadian allies, the Star reported. Also not included in the ban are components for F-35 fighter jets that Canada sells to the U.S., some of which are then used by the IDF.

Canadian publication The Maple reported viewing documents that stated Ottawa authorized CAD 28.5 million ($21.1 million) in military exports to Israel in the two months after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, which is more than the CAD 26 million ($19.2 million) annual record high for such exports.

“The more important aspect of this diplomatic frisson isn’t Canada actually providing anything meaningful in terms of military materiel, but is much more about the precedent,” said former Canadian Ambassador to Israel Vivian Bercovici.

“That becomes a different analysis in terms of what diplomatic precedent this sets and Canada’s influence on the world stage.”

According to Global Affairs Canada, as the Foreign Ministry is known, the country exported over CAD 21 million ($15.5 million) in military goods and technology to Israel in 2022. This puts Israel among the top 10 export destinations for Canada, but is only a small fraction of Israel’s defense expenditures, which reached $23.4 billion in 2022.

Ottawa’s decision could have a more meaningful impact, however, if other countries see it as a green light to do the same.

According to Bercovici, “the more important aspect of this diplomatic frisson isn’t Canada actually providing anything meaningful in terms of military materiel, but is much more about the precedent. That becomes a different analysis in terms of what diplomatic precedent this sets and Canada’s influence on the world stage.”

Dan Illouz, a member of Knesset from Likud who was born and grew up in Montreal, similarly told JI that “the real damage, when it comes to Israel’s defense, is not only from Canada itself…it’s that Canada is the first G7 country to actually take this step.”

“The G7 includes the leaders of the free world, the countries we want to align with against the Iranian axis,” Illouz added. “The precedent this could set is problematic. Canada is choosing to be on the wrong side of history, and I hope others do not follow. When you start these things, you never know where they will end.”

Other Western countries have taken
steps towards halting military exports to Israel. Spain’s foreign minister announced an embargo on arms sales to Israel, and Belgium said it suspended gunpowder exports to Israel.

In February, a Dutch court ordered the government to halt the export of F-35 parts to Israel, stating that there is a “clear risk” that they will be used “in serious violations of international humanitarian law.” The government, however, said it would appeal the ruling.

“In the long run, I believe Canada will lose a lot of this credibility if it starts undermining democracies trying to defend themselves against terror just to appease extremist elements of its society and political structure,” said Dan Illouz, a member of Knesset from Likud who was born and grew up in Montreal.

Though Italy had announced soon after the war began that it would stop arms exports to Israel, citing a law that bans such exports to countries waging war, Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto said last week that orders placed before the war began were still being fulfilled.

U.K. Foreign Secretary David Cameron is reportedly considering such restrictions if Israel enters Rafah.

Illouz noted that Canada is viewed as a country with credibility on human rights issues.

“In the long run, I believe Canada will lose a lot of this credibility if it starts undermining democracies trying to defend themselves against terror just to appease extremist elements of its society and political structure,” he said.

Bercovici, who was appointed ambassador by a Conservative government, argued that Trudeau was already losing that credibility.

“There are benefits and disadvantages to being Canada and no one paying attention to you. Sometimes we punch above our weight...Under Justin Trudeau we don’t, so nobody pays attention,” she said.

Bercovici argued that Trudeau has used foreign policy to “pander to various highly sectarian domestic interests.” Trudeau “is always ready to jump for any Muslim or Palestinian cause without question and also very quick to criticize and attack Israel. He loves to invoke ‘even among friends there are disagreements’ bromide,’ which is garbage,” she said.

In November, Trudeau said in a press conference that “the world is witnessing this killing of women, of children, of babies” by Israel. Netanyahu responded in a post shortly after that “It is not Israel that is deliberately targeting civilians but Hamas that beheaded, burned and massacred civilians in the worst horrors perpetrated on Jews since the Holocaust. While Israel is doing everything to keep civilians out of harm’s way, Hamas is doing everything to keep them in harm’s way...The forces of civilization must back Israel in defeating Hamas barbarism.

Joly, meanwhile, visited Israel days before the vote on the motion to ban arms sales to Israel. She took that opportunity to announce Canada was committing CAD 1 million ($740,000) to investigating allegations of sexual violence against Palestinians. Joly, who did not acknowledge the sexual violence that took place on Oct. 7 until two months after the attacks, said Canada would grant same amount to survivors of Hamas sexual violence. Joly also did not meet with hostage families during her visit or at any time since the Hamas attack, a Canadian source told JI.

Canada also decided earlier this month to renew its funding for UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinians, which had been suspended due to evidence that a number of its employees were Hamas members, with some having taken part in the Oct. 7 terrorism and in holding Israeli civilians hostage.

Still, some in Jerusalem portrayed officials’ efforts ahead of the House of Commons vote as effective in softening the motion’s language. A diplomatic source argued that the change in the language from suspending all defense exports to only banning future orders came following Joly’s meetings with President Isaac Herzog and others.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said that Canada’s decision to stop shipping arms to Israel “undermines Israel’s right to self-defense against the Hamas murderers who committed terrible crimes against humanity and against the innocent civilians of Israel, including elderly, women and children.”

War cabinet Minister Benny Gantz’s office told JI that his phone call with Trudeau earlier in the week was to press for the House of Commons drop language calling for unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state, because “such motions are a prize for terrorism and Hamas.” The spokesman said Trudeau “agreed with [Gantz] and promised to do what he can to prevent or at least soften it, and that is what happened.”

The Canadian media, however, portrayed the negotiations on the motion’s language between Joly and NDP MP Heather MacPherson, who proposed it, as ensuring it was in line with the government’s policy favoring a negotiated two-state solution, so that the Liberals could support it without splitting the vote and to avoid liability over existing export agreements. Only three Liberal MPs voted against the motion.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said that Canada’s decision to stop shipping arms to Israel “undermines Israel’s right to self-defense against the Hamas murderers who committed terrible crimes against humanity and against the innocent civilians of Israel, including elderly, women and children.

“History will harshly judge the current step of the Canadian government,” Katz added. “The State of Israel will continue fighting to destroy Hamas and bring all of its hostages home.”

Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer said that “all those countries turning away from Israel now will look back at this moment as a mark of shame. After all those statements in support of the Jewish people when we’re victims, you abandon us now, on the last leg before our victory against a genocidal terrorist force? Shameful.”

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