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THE WEEKLY PRINT

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MAY 7, 2024

UF President Ben Sasse: Negotiations with ‘the people who happen to scream the loudest,’ are unwise

‘We support folks’ free speech rights, but that includes the right to make an ass and an idiot of yourself,’ Sasse tells JI in conversation about campus protests

By Gabby Deutch

LOS ANGELES — Last week, while college administrators across the U.S. seemed paralyzed over how to respond to campus anti-Israel protesters, one school weighed in with a simple statement that served as a counterweight to the hemming and hawing of elite private universities. “The University of Florida is not a daycare, and we do not treat protesters like children,” a UF spokesperson said, declaring that students in an unauthorized encampment would face disciplinary action if they did not leave.

The statement achieved every PR flak’s dream: It went viral. Much of the positive attention heaped on the school landed on Ben Sasse, the former Nebraska senator and Yale-educated historian who has been the president of UF since early 2023. (A guest on Fox News on Monday praised Sasse and said, “Don’t be an ass, do it like Sasse.”)

“It isn’t that complicated to affirm free speech and free assembly, which are fundamental American rights and something that institutionally we’re committed to. But that doesn’t mean that the people who are the loudest are the ones who don’t have to obey the rules that everybody else does,” Sasse told Jewish Insider on Monday in a conversation at the Milken Institute Global Forum in Los Angeles.

For many universities, the seven months since the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel that sparked a war in the Middle East and touched off a wave of antisemitism in the U.S. have been marked by instability and indecision. Sasse took a stand early, condemning Hamas’ attack soon after Oct. 7 and raising his voice against antisemitism. But when it comes to the encampment on the Gainesville campus, Sasse said his response is only about enforcing rules and not going after students for having opinions with which he disagrees.

Campus rules allow tents on one occasion, said Sasse — tailgating during football season, when tents are allowed only in certain places and for a particular amount of time. “Why would a specific group of protesters get special license that nobody else gets?” he asked.
“We support folks’ free speech rights, but that includes the right to make an ass and an idiot of yourself, and a lot of the protesters say ridiculously, historically and geographically ignorant things,” Sasse said. There should be a role for universities and educators to play in responding to the content of what protesters are saying, he added, especially when some of their language echoes terrorist talking points.

“We don’t start by trying to prohibit speech, but we do want to ask fundamental questions about whether or not enough education is happening. The paraglider memes that are now replacing Che Guevara on T-shirts is so bizarre. Which paragliders are we talking about — the savages who raped teenage girls at a concert? That’s who you want to be the icon and the sort of shorthand for the movement you’re defending?” Sasse asked. “At the end of the day, there was an instigator that moved on 10/7, and it’s just amazing how quickly stupid and reductionistic so many of the protests have become.”

Sasse, who earned a bachelor’s degree at Harvard and a doctorate in history at Yale, declined to comment specifically on how those or other schools are handling similar issues. But he took an indirect swipe at universities like Columbia and the University of Southern California that have canceled commencement and other university events.

“I don’t make it my business to comment inside other institutions’ management decisions particularly, but I just don’t know who benefits by canceling these commencements. I don’t know who benefits by allowing people to disrupt the opportunity for students who have an exam tomorrow morning to be able to study in the library,” he said. “I know that we suffer as a community when people are spitting on police. I don’t know who benefits by vandalizing buildings. I just don’t understand the leadership decisions that are made in a lot of other places.”

He took the same approach regarding other universities, like Northwestern, that have sat down to negotiate with the protesters and even reach agreements with them. Sasse has no plans to do the same. “We just don’t think it’s prudent or wise or helpful to negotiate with the people who happen to scream the loudest,” Sasse explained.

UF has more Jewish students than any other university in America, according to data compiled by Hillel International — 6,500 Jewish undergrads and 2,900 Jewish graduate students. Sasse attended a massive seder at the university last month that drew more than 1,000 people.

“It is a special community. I think everybody feels safe. But I want the feelings to not be subjective, I want it to be because objectively, they are safe,” Sasse said. “Our Jewish Gators, as they call themselves, feel like it’s a pretty darn special place to be right now.”

HUNDREDS OF JEWISH COLUMBIA STUDENTS EXPRESS PRIDE FOR ISRAEL AND THEIR JEWISH FAITH IN OPEN LETTER

Columbia student Eliana Goldin: ‘It’s important that the entire world sees there is a strong contingent of Jewish students on campus who are Zionists and willing to stand up and speak for that’

By Haley Cohen

Hundreds of Jewish Columbia University students signed on to an open letter to the university community on Wednesday, declaring that they are “proud to be Zionists” while speaking out against the anti-Israel protesters that have engulfed the Ivy League campus since the Oct. 7 terrorist attacks.

The letter, titled “In Our Name,” was authored by four students — Eliana Goldin ‘25; Elisha Baker ‘26; Eden Yadegar ’25 and Rivka Yellin, Barnard College ‘26. By Wednesday night, it garnered more than 400 signatures.

“Over the past six months, many have spoken in our name,” the letter opens. “We are here, writing to you as Jewish students at Columbia University, who are connected to our community and deeply engaged with our culture and history. We would like to speak in our name.”

“Most of us did not choose to be political activists,” the students wrote. “We do not bang on drums and chant catchy slogans. We are average students, just trying to make it through finals much like the rest of you.”

“If the last six months on campus have taught us anything, it is that a large and vocal population of the Columbia community does not understand the meaning of Zionism, and subsequently does not understand the essence of the Jewish People,” the letter continued. “Yet despite the fact that we have been calling out the antisemitism we’ve been experiencing for months, our concerns have been brushed off and invalidated.”

The letter goes on to reference several incidents that have occurred on campus:
“We sounded the alarm on October 12 when many protested against Israel while our friends’ and families’ dead bodies were still warm. We recoiled when people screamed ‘resist by any means necessary,’ telling us we are “all inbred” and that we ‘have no culture.’ We shuddered when an ‘activist’ held up a sign telling Jewish students they were Hamas’s next targets... We ultimately were not surprised when a leader of the CUAD [Columbia University Against Apartheid] encampment said publicly and proudly that ‘Zionists don’t deserve to live’ and that we’re lucky they are ‘not just going out and murdering Zionists.’ We felt helpless when we watched students and faculty physically block Jewish students from entering parts of the campus we share, or even when they turned their faces away in silence. This silence is familiar. We will never forget.”

“One thing is for sure,” the students wrote. “We will not stop standing up for ourselves. We are proud to be Jews, and we are proud to be Zionists.”

In an interview with Jewish Insider, Goldin, a third-year political science major pursuing a dual degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary, said that the letter’s conclusion was most significant to her because it emphasizes that “we want to sit down and have a dialogue. The point of a university is to be able to have complex conversations. We even want to sit down with people who are saying ‘globalize the intifada.’

The concluding paragraph reads, “We came to Columbia because we wanted to expand our minds and engage in complex conversations. While campus may be riddled with hateful rhetoric and simplistic binaries now, it is never too late to start repairing the fractures and begin developing meaningful relationships across political and religious divides. Our tradition tells us, “Love peace and pursue peace.” We hope you will join us in earnestly pursuing peace, truth, and empathy. Together we can repair our campus.”

Goldin told JI that “the media is not accurately covering what the Jewish community on campus looks like and this was our way of saying what the Jewish community stands for.” She noted that the letter took two days of “nonstop writing and editing.”

“It’s important that the entire world sees there is a strong contingent of Jewish students on campus who are Zionists and willing to stand up and speak for that,” Goldin said. “The anti-Zionist Jews are speaking for all Jewish students at Columbia right now and they’re getting a lot of attention, so it’s important for people to see this strong majority of Jewish students who feel otherwise.”

Goldin said that the letter has caught the attention of Jewish students who hadn’t been vocal about support for Israel in the past. “I just got an email from someone Jewish who is not involved with the Jewish community,” she said. “He said the letter really spoke to him and signed on. So I think this has a certain impact within the pro-Israel community.”

“In terms of the anti-Israel community, I’m not sure how much of an impact it can make,” Goldin continued. “But the main purpose of the letter really was to show that amid all the biased media coverage, we will actually speak for ourselves.”

MAY 6, 2024

Jewish leaders worry that university presidents are appeasing anti-Israel protesters — at any cost

Hillel vice president: ‘No university can exist if rules violators are rewarded with financial incentives, while students who do abide by the rules are not similarly rewarded’

By Haley Cohen

Hundreds of Jewish Columbia University students fear that universities around the country strike various deals with anti-Israel protesters to quell the turmoil on college campuses — including giving protesters a seat at the table regarding investment decisions — Jewish leaders fear that even these largely symbolic concessions could further poison the atmosphere for Jewish students.

Negotiating with protesters sets up a climate in which “Jewish students — who are not violating rules — are being ignored, bullied and intimidated,” Mark Rotenberg, vice president and general counsel of Hillel International, told Jewish Insider. “People who violate university rules should not be rewarded with financial benefits and rewards for the violation of university rules,” he continued.

Shira Goodman, senior director of advocacy at the Anti-Defamation League, echoed that the series of deals struck all “ignore the needs of Jewish students increasingly at risk of harassment and intimidation, or worse, on campus.”

“It is critical to acknowledge the facts on the ground,” Goodman said. “For days and in some cases weeks, anti-Zionist protesters have openly violated school policies and
codes of conduct by erecting encampments that have provided cover for students to fan the flames of antisemitism and wreak havoc on the entire campus community... The protesters' aim and impact on many campuses has been to intimidate and alienate Jewish students for whom Zionism and a connection to Israel is a component of their Jewish identity. They must be held to account, not rewarded for their conduct.”

The nationwide “Gaza solidarity encampments” began on April 17 at Columbia University. On April 29, Northwestern University set the precedent for conceding to some of the protesters’ demands when its president, Michael Schill, reached an agreement with the activists to end their anti-Israel encampment, in which protesters camped out and engulfed campuses for weeks.

The protesters — most, but not all, of whom were students — took over buildings, blocked access to thoroughways, vandalized school property and chanted intimidating, antisemitic slogans while calling for an end to Israel's war with Hamas and demanding that institutions cut ties with the Jewish state.

The deal at Northwestern complied with several of the students’ demands. These include allowing students to protest until the end of classes on June 1 so long as tents are removed, and to encourage employers not to rescind job offers for student protesters. The school will also allow students to weigh in on university investments — a major concession for students who have been demanding the university to divest from Israeli corporations.

The Anti-Defamation League, StandWithUs and the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law joined together to slam the strategy and call for Schill’s resignation after the agreement was announced. But a handful of schools, including University of Minnesota, Brown University, Rutgers University and University of California, Riverside followed suit — giving into the demands of encampment protesters in an effort to shut them down.

While all of the agreements center around divesting from Israel, resolutions at each school look different. At Rutgers, a proposed deal reached last Thursday includes divesting from corporations participating in or benefiting from Israel; terminating Rutgers’ partnership with Tel Aviv University; accepting at least 10 displaced students from Gaza; and displaying Palestinian flags alongside other existing international flags on campus. Eight out of the 10 demands were met, while Rutgers students, faculty and alumni continue to push for the two not yet agreed to — an official call for divestment as well as cutting ties with Tel Aviv University.

At Minnesota, meanwhile, protesters packed their tents after a 90-minute meeting with Jeff Ettinger, the school's interim president. A tentative deal was reached, which could include divestment from companies such as Honeywell and General Dynamics, academic divestment from Israeli universities, transparency about university investments, a statement in support of Palestinian students, a statement in support of Palestinians’ right to self-determination and amnesty for students arrested while protesting (nine people were arrested on campus on April 22).

In a statement to students and faculty, Ettinger wrote that coalition representatives will be given the opportunity to address the board of regents at its May 10 meeting to discuss divestment from certain companies. Public disclosure of university investments would be made available by May 7. Ettinger also said that the administration has asked university police not to arrest or charge anyone for participating in encampment activities in the past few days, and will not pursue disciplinary action against students or employees for protesting.

Rotenberg, who was general counsel of University of Minnesota for 20 years before coming to Hillel, told JI that he is working on a statement objecting to the settlements, which will be addressed to the school’s board of regents.

“I am hopeful that this is not a trend,” Rotenberg said. “No university can exist if rule violators are rewarded with financial incentives, while students who do abide by the rules are not similarly rewarded,” he continued. “That’s an upside-down world and it cannot be acceptable for individuals who violate university regulations to be given the benefits while our students’ voices are not heard.”
nothing to say to the Jewish community,” Elman said. “Nothing condemning the rank antisemitism on display, in rhetoric and calls for violence against Israeli citizens. How can you not even in one paragraph of your statement condemn how antisemitism has infused these protests?”

In a statement to JI, Jacob Baime, CEO of the Israel on Campus Coalition, called on university administrators to “clear the encampments, equally enforce existing policies, and protect Jewish students and their friends and allies,” without capitulating to “supporters of Hamas.”

Experts said that it’s too early to know whether or not the concessions offered are merely symbolic — Brown, for example, plans to wait until October for its corporate board to vote on a proposal to divest from Israeli interests, as per its negotiation with protesters. But already, according to the ADL’s Goodman, administrations that have made deals “[incentivized] further rules violations and disruption and normalized antisemitism on campus.”

Goodman cautioned that as universities try to restore order during finals and graduations, more may strike similar deals. “Administrators may see this as an acceptable solution to resolve the current situation on their own campus... It will also be interesting to see how they determine whether protestors who committed no further code of conduct violations comply and what happens if they do not comply.”

Rotenberg warned, “The Jewish community has ample reason to fear when people take the law into their own hands and who, after being warned, decide to violate the norms of their community and then get rewarded for doing so.” Going down that path, he said, is “marching down the road to authoritarianism.”

MAY 8, 2024

Birthright Israel prepares for a smaller-than-normal, but still comparatively large summer season

Some 9,000 people are slated to participate in the group’s 10-day trips to Israel, down from 12,000 last year, but still considerably better than most other Israel travel programs

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

A Zoe Wolf isn’t scared that her first trip to Israel will be during a war. After all, she’s just made it through her first year on a college campus.

“Without question, I will feel safer in Israel right now as opposed to on any college campus in America,” said Wolf, who just wrapped up her freshman year at Florida State University and is slated to participate in Birthright Israel’s 10-day trip to the Jewish state this summer. She pointed to the unprecedented levels of antisemitic and anti-Israel rhetoric on college campuses since the Oct. 7 terrorist attacks — including, at some schools, physical assaults — and her personal experience with classmates posting anti-Jewish messages online.

“Since the war started, people constantly said to me, ‘Oh, Zoe, I know you had wanted to go to Israel but maybe you should wait,’” the international affairs and linguistics major told eJewishPhilanthropy. “But for some reason, I’ve never felt more of a want to go than during this harsh time. I don’t think Israel will feel like an unsafe, scary place. I’m expecting to feel connected. Most importantly, I expect to feel a closeness to the land.”

Wolf is among the 9,000 North American 18-26-year-olds registered for Birthright’s standard 10-day trip — undeterred by Israel’s war with Hamas in Gaza and the ongoing fighting along Israel’s northern border. The number of participants is considered low for Birthright, the largest educational-tourism organization in the world. Last summer, 12,000 people participated in Birthright’s original 10-day program.

Still, the turnout is large compared to other types of tourism to Israel, particularly teen trips, some of which are expected to see a 90% decrease this summer.

In total, some 13,500 people will participate in a Birthright Israel program this summer, with 3,000 registered for the Birthright Israel Onward Volunteer Program; 1,400 for the Onward internships and fellowships; and 64 for the Birthright Israel Excel fellowship program.

While the summer months are usually Birthright’s busiest time, the group’s numbers have slowly begun to climb throughout the year. In November, just weeks after Oct. 7, Birthright brought 2,000 volunteers to Israel through its Onward Program. By January, another 1,000 participated in the relaunched winter session 10-day program.

Some participants are apprehensive about the trip — but are pushing themselves to go.

“I’m a little nervous to go to Israel,” said Marlene Volovitz, who just completed her second year at University of Miami and
Black Jewish Seder brings together leading advocates, actors, musicians in L.A.

Idea for the meal came about during a conversation between CNN political commentator Van Jones and Deborah Marcus, an executive at the Creative Artists Agency (CAA) Foundation

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Tiffany Haddish found the afikomen at a Seder no one was expected to know about, one that included advocates and award-winning actors and musicians from the overlapping Black and Jewish communities.

The idea for the event was sparked during a conversation between CNN political commentator Van Jones and Deborah Marcus, executive at the Creative Artists Agency (CAA) Foundation, the talent agency’s philanthropic arm, about hosting an event that would help bring the Black and Jewish communities together during this tumultuous time when the Gaza war has driven a wedge between many in both communities.

“Pick a date,” Marcus said, and she offered to hold it at her house.

The Seder, which was held in Los Angeles last Monday, the final night of Passover, was inspired by past “Freedom Seders” that brought together members of the Black and Jewish communities. Black and Jewish communities have a storied history of working together, such as during the Civil Rights Movement, but have also found themselves at times divided, with major figures in both communities resorting to using stereotypical tropes such as referring to Jewish people as termites or Black people as monkeys. A December 2023 Times/Siena Poll showed that Black voters sympathized more with Palestinians than with Israelis.

The 25 attendees included Grammy-nominated songwriter Freddie Wexler, singer Aloe Blacc and actor (and Seder leader) Jonah Platt. They were invited from across the advocate and entertainment world, including talent not affiliated with CAA. Marcus said she invited people she knew who shared similar values.

“Bringing people together over meals, over rituals, is just a fabulous way to build bridges and to reconnect,” Marcus told eJewishPhilanthropy. “The story of Exodus is an important one to Jews and is also one that is relevant to many in the Black community.”

The Seder was not an official CAA event and received no funding from the agency. Marcus never expected so much buzz around it. There were no press releases, no interviews scheduled. But within days, pictures flooded the internet because attendees were so moved.

“Nights like this are super important,” singer and actress Malynda Hale told eJP. She hopes to launch her own Soul Food Shabbat events later this year to help inspire “more discussions on how our communities can come together and be there for one another and others.” She is not Jewish, but said, “It was beautiful to share a night learning about someone else’s culture.”

The event featured food cooked by James
Beard Award-winner Aliza J. Sokolow, the author of This is What I Eat, and included brisket, salmon, cauliflower, asparagus and macaroons. “I think we all ate matzah before we were supposed to,” Hale said of the long ritual meal. “I know I did.”

The event ran over four hours. “Everyone said to me, ‘Things don’t go late in Los Angeles, you’ll definitely be able to leave at 10:30 [to catch a plane].’” Amanda Berman, founder and executive director of the Zioness Movement, told eJP. Luckily, her plane was delayed. “We didn’t eat dinner for several hours because we were having beautiful moments and experiences together.”

Things got especially emotional, Berman said, during the Four Questions, when Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback, the senior rabbi at Stephen Wise Temple and Schools, prompted other attendees to share about their challenges, personally, professionally and based around the chaos of the world.

“It was such a moving and meaningful moment because there was so much solidarity and feeling of love and connection that everyone felt comfortable enough to really share what they were struggling with,” Berman said. “They felt so much support from the people around them. People were holding hands, touching each other’s shoulders.”

Attendees spent much of the Seder reflecting on the history of Black-Jewish partnership and how it’s impacted their communities and the nation. They recognized that being Black and Jewish are not binary, there are many Jews of all backgrounds.

“It’s so important especially now to spend time listening to one another’s stories with curiosity and empathy, asking questions, opening ourselves to new perspectives. This is how we grow,” Zweiback told eJP. “Our stories are deeply intertwined. Our struggles are shared ones. We are better and stronger and freer together.”

For the past two years, the CAA Foundation, which traditionally focused on arts, education, civic engagement, the climate crisis and responding to natural disasters, has shifted its focus to include combating antisemitism. In 2022, it held a town hall in partnership with the American Jewish Committee and the Black-Jewish Entertainment Alliance discussing antisemitism and produced an educational tool kit about antisemitism. Last year, it hosted a conversation with Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, and this year it’s holding screenings of Oct. 7 footage.

This shift is “personal to me,” Marcus said. “It’s been important to many in our company, and it’s also been important to many of our clients who wanted the additional resources and wanted to then be connected to organizations who are working to fight antisemitism and to support the Jewish community.”

Seeing people with such large platforms come together around a Seder table to share stories of liberation and commit to caring for one another offered hope, Zioness’ Berman said.

“This was one of those moments of remembering that there are allies out there,” she said. “There are people who care. There are people who would say yes to an invitation. There are people who are not Jewish who are thinking of us, who stand with us.”

Israel and Ukraine are fighting off the same enemies and need U.S. support to continue, Ukrainian Ambassador to Israel Yevgen Korniychuk told Jewish Insider on Wednesday.

“What unites us is that we are against the axis of evil,” Korniychuk said, describing “a tripartite coalition of Iran, Russia and North Korea, presumably backed by China – you see that in the transfer of technology.”

“If the rest of the democratic world stops Russia now, they will save their future and the future of their children,” he added. “It’s not just about Ukraine. Russia basically assumes they’re fighting the U.S. in the territory of Ukraine; that’s what they are telling their public.”

Korniychuk said the message often heard from American politicians — “we will not allow Ukraine to lose, we will not allow Russia to prevail” — is insufficient.

“They need to help Ukraine win and Russia lose. That is a clear message,” he emphasized.

At the same time, Korniychuk said that “Ukraine already won this war, because what Russia had in mind was to destroy the legitimately elected Ukrainian government and change it to pro-Russian leadership. We held our independent state and the majority of our territories. About 20% is unfortunately temporarily occupied, but we are not willing to surrender.”

“We do wake up in the morning and say thank you every day for what [the U.S. is] doing for us, but unfortunately, it’s not
enough... Our people are dying on the front lines every single day,” the ambassador said.

Ukraine took notice when Israel, the U.S., U.K., France and Jordan acted together to thwart Iran's missile and drone attack.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky wrote on X at the time: “The entire world witnessed allied action in the skies above Israel and neighboring countries. It demonstrated how truly effective unity in defending against terror can be when it is based on sufficient political will... European skies could have received the same level of protection long ago if Ukraine had received similar full support from its partners in intercepting drones and missiles.”

“I was elected to parliament in Ukraine twice...in the 2000s,” Korniychuk recalled. “At that time, Russia tried to control Ukraine using economic influence, to buy the votes of our people and our politicians by spoiling them with cheap gas. Unfortunately, the majority of Ukrainians before 2014, when Russia took over Crimea and started the war in the Donbas, were against joining NATO and the EU... Russian propaganda was so good that I fell for it myself.”

In contrast, Korniychuk said, “Israel has been working with the U.S. on its security since their first defense agreement in 1962. Israel is currently in the midst of a 10-year security agreement, which is enhanced every time it is renewed with better cooperation in intelligence and technology and joining production.”

Korniychuk became a familiar face in the Jewish state after Russia invaded his country in 2022, with frequent interviews, press conferences and media stunts to call attention to Kyiv’s plight and what he felt Israel could be doing to help more. But he has been much less of a local media fixture since Hamas’ attack on Oct. 7, with Israelis’ attention locked on its own war effort and hostage crisis.

Korniychuk said it’s “natural” that the world would lose interest in Ukraine when the war has been ongoing for two and a half years, and that “the U.S. is very involved with itself” because it’s an election year.

However, “people on the front lines are tired, as are civilians. Every Ukrainian is impacted by this war...I cannot tell you how deep the sorrow and anger is.”

Ukraine is continuing the war, the ambassador said, and called on the democratic world to continue to support its military immediately in order to keep Russia from pushing further into Ukrainian territory.

“We are grateful to our partners around the world, the U.S., Great Britain and other European countries, our neighbors who have been helping from day one [of the war], and to Israelis who have been doing what they can in their difficult situation after Oct 7,” he said, “but from what I see, our American partners are managing the risks against a nuclear superpower and are feeding us with a teaspoon.”

“History can repeat itself with another Pearl Harbor,” Korniychuk warned. “We need powerful world leadership to make the decision to stop Russia, whatever it takes.”

“When our American partners tell us that they will give Ukraine everything we need to be able to return our territories that were occupied by 2025, I do hope that we all survive until 2025 and keep the Russian enemy where it is. The aid is needed now,” he added.

Korniychuk said he was surprised to see how many Republican members of Congress voted against the $95 billion aid package to Ukraine and Israel, attributing the opposition to long-standing isolationist views in American politics.

“History can repeat itself with another Pearl Harbor,” he warned. “We need powerful world leadership to make the decision to stop Russia, whatever it takes.”

In addition, he warned that “Russian propaganda works better than Russian troops,” and that Moscow is “trying to buy politicians in the West and create biased media, even in the U.S., and they have been successful.”

As for the frequently heard argument about corruption among opponents of Ukraine aid in Congress, Korniychuk pointed out that the military aid can only be used for procurements in the U.S.: “They will have the tools to watch closely how the money is spent and where the weapons go and watch every single one of these weapons move to the front line.”

“When they talk about corruption, this is Russian propaganda, which says in its news that Ukraine is the most corrupt country in the world," he said.”
With a new book, Polish priest uncovers buried past of a Jewish community destroyed by Nazis

‘Chocz The Promised Land? The history of the Jewish community,’ spotlights a community that played a significant role in the town from the early 19th century until it was vanquished by the Holocaust

By Lianne Kolirin

The grainy black-and-white photographs appear like classic yearbook pictures: Rows of young, elementary-school students — the girls in sailor dresses and the boys in blazers, all wearing dour expressions — are set against the soot-covered stone walls and casement windows of an old school building.

The unassuming photos, believed to have been taken sometime in 1936-1937, a few years before the Nazis rampaged through Poland, were from Chocz, a small town in central Poland. And when they ended up in the hands of a Polish Catholic priest who grew up in Chocz and was researching the town's history for a book, the pictures — which were shot by a Jewish photographer and included two Jewish girls — launched Leszek Szkudlarek on a three-year-long journey that has illuminated the town's long-buried Jewish history.

That research, carried out with the help of his former history teacher and the online genealogical site MyHeritage, forms the basis of Szkudlarek's just-published book, Chocz The Promised Land? The history of the Jewish community.

“My initial plan was that the Jewish people of Chocz would be just one chapter in the book,” said the priest, who admitted that he never knew Jews ever lived in his hometown. “But it was very interesting so I decided to write a whole book about the history of the town’s Jewish community.”

Szkudlarek’s project took a dramatic turn after he read an article in a local paper written by a woman who taught him history at school. The piece focused on a Jewish girl from Chocz who died in the Lodz Ghetto.

Up until that point Szkudlarek, a Catholic priest in the town of Paczków about 150 miles away, had no idea that Jewish people ever lived in Chocz, which is home to around 2,000 people.

He contacted the teacher, who went on to share more information with him — including the two school yearbook pictures that she said were “taken by the Jew Lewin.”

Intrigued, Szkudlarek then set about meticulously researching the identities of some of the individuals pictured in order to uncover the truth about the town’s Jewish community, which played a significant role in the town from the early 19th century until it was vanquished by the Holocaust.

The project, a labor of love undertaken during Szkudlarek’s private time, took around three years to complete. To collect information, he dug through archives and recorded testimonies and materials from residents, including one man who uncovered a collection of old Jewish books during a renovation of his attic.

But it was the photographs that proved crucial for his research. One of the pictures featured two Jewish children — Perla Jakubowicz and Abram Kluczkowski. The former perished in the Lodz Ghetto; Szkudlarek has still not uncovered the fate of Kluczkowski.

The second school photograph included three girls — Hinda and Frajda Kott and Hana Lev — who were all killed during the Holocaust, according to records he found through Yad Vashem.

Szkudlarek was researching the fate of the photographer, David Lewin.

Thanks to the extensive records and online family trees on the online genealogy site MyHeritage, he tracked down one of Lewin’s relatives: Sharon Stern, a 62-year-old retired psychologist from Tampa Bay, Fla.

Despite speaking no English, Szkudlarek reached out to Stern and discovered that her maternal grandmother, Tauba Edelsburg (nee Lewin), was born in Chocz in 1904. She was the photographer’s sister.

Through the website — and thanks to Google Translate — the pair spent some time corresponding, Stern sent Szkudlarek more photos taken by her great-uncle and of her family, while also connecting him to two of Lewin’s surviving children — a son in Israel and a daughter in Argentina, where the photographer settled after leaving Poland before World War II.

The information flowed both ways, as Stern also discovered new things about her own family through Szkudlarek — including the name and birth date of her grandmother’s sister who was shot and killed.

Stern told JI, “In going back and forth, Leszek said, ‘It would be my great honor if you would come back here for the book launch. I will pay for your accommodation, I will pay for your food.’”

Both of Stern’s parents were born in Poland and her father was a Holocaust survivor. As such, she had previously visited the country — but had never been to Chocz.

“I couldn’t say yes fast enough,” she said. “It was a dream come true.”

Szkudlarek brought his English-speaking nephew, Marek, along to translate, though they soon discovered that they both speak Spanish and could communicate directly through their shared language.

In a video call with JI and speaking through an interpreter, Szkudlarek said he had known “nothing at all” about the Jewish history of the town before reading the article by his former teacher.

That prompted him to delve into archives, uncovering the birth certificates...
of some of those in the pictures, as well as speaking to elderly residents of the town who still remember their Jewish peers.

He said the research he carried out on MyHeritage was the “key” that unlocked much of the buried past — while leading him to Stern and other relatives of those whose fates he was trying to uncover.

He was “very happy” that Stern took up his offer to visit Poland, because it was “very important to meet with her and for our community in Chocz.”

The book has been the subject of considerable local media interest, according to Szkudlarek, who said he has since been contacted by many people with new leads about the former Jewish community. He hopes to continue with his research and said it would be “his dream” to have his book translated into English.

Stern documented her journey in videos and photos of the packed itinerary that Szkudlarek had arranged for her — including a stop at an abandoned Jewish cemetery.

The book launch in March was held in the former fire station — now a cultural center — where the Jews of Chocz were rounded up by the Nazis and deported in the early 1940s.

While the fate of those who perished in the Holocaust cast a long shadow, Stern was heartened by the locals’ interest and enthusiasm. There was a standing-room-only crowd at the book launch, which featured music and speeches and displays of some of her great-uncle’s photography.

“My family, especially my father, didn’t have good things to say about the Poles,” said Stern.

“My trip was such a wonderful experience, and it definitely restored my faith in people. The Polish people were really warm to me.”

She added: “I have a lifelong friend in the priest and his nephew Marek.”

“My image of a priest is someone who is very staid and serious and he was anything but. He has a great sense of humor, he laughed a lot, it was absolutely wonderful.”

Naama Lanski, a researcher for MyHeritage, said that the meeting between Stern and the priest “embodies the power of family history research, which can lead to fascinating and completely unexpected connections between people.

“A Catholic priest from Poland who teams up with a Jewish woman from Florida, to tell the unknown story of an entire community, most of whom perished in the Holocaust. Such beautiful stories make us, again and again, happy and optimistic about the good that connects people.”

Craig Goldman aims to be the third Jewish Republican in the House

Goldman is leaning into his support for traditional conservative internationalism, including support for Israel and Ukraine

By Marc Rod

Texas state Rep. Craig Goldman is running to join an exclusive club: If he wins a May 28 primary runoff, Goldman is on a glide path to becoming the third Jewish Republican in Congress — not to mention the first Jewish Republican ever elected to Congress from the Lone Star State.

Goldman, running in Texas’ 12th Congressional District, which includes parts of Fort Worth and surrounding areas and is currently held by retiring Rep. Kay Granger (R-TX), led GOP opponent John O’Shea in the primary, 44% to 26%. He’s favored to prevail in next month’s runoff, necessitated because neither candidate won a majority of the vote. He has also raised nearly six times as much as O’Shea, pulling in $1.9 million to O’Shea’s $300,000.

Unlike a growing faction of his party, Goldman, 55, is leaning hard into support for U.S. allies abroad, including both Israel and Ukraine.

“What’s going on in Ukraine, what’s going on in Israel have major implications to not only their futures, but the future of our nation,” Goldman said.

He vowed “unilateral, unconditional support for Israel,” adding that the U.S. should give Israel “whatever means they need” to “go after every single individual who’s part of Hamas.” And he said the U.S. has “no right as a nation to tell Israel how they should run their war.”

Goldman said he encourages everyone to visit Israel to better understand the country and the dangers it faces. “It also has fabulous people who just want to live their lives and live in peace,” Goldman continued. “They certainly aren’t warmongers there. No one asked for this situation to happen... but what Hamas did is indefensible and so I’m all for the strongest response Israel is giving to them.”

Asked about countering threats from Iran in the region, the Texas lawmaker told
JI that the U.S. needs to "make it very clear that an attack on Israel is an attack on the United States and we'll do anything and everything to defend our friends."

Many Americans, he continued, "don't understand having an enemy across many of your borders — especially the northern border and southern border — who literally want to kill you just because of who you are and where you live."

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"It also has fabulous people who just want to live their lives and live in peace," Goldman continued. "They certainly aren't warmongers there. No one asked for this situation to happen... but what Hamas did is indefensible and so I'm all for the strongest response Israel is giving to them."

Goldman, whose congressional district would include a manufacturing facility for F-35 fighter jets, said he was proud to have been in Israel at the air base when the country's first F-35 was delivered and that his signature is on its fuselage.

Looking ahead to after the war, Goldman expressed hope that the Palestinian people in Gaza will want to "live in peace and raise their families and educate their children and live normal lives" but said he doesn't have the foreign policy expertise yet to evaluate what that looks like and how it can be achieved, including whether a two-state solution should be part of that outcome.

He gave a similar answer when asked about strategies for countering Iranian proxy attacks on U.S. forces in the region.

In the shorter term, Goldman said that the U.S. should take its cues from Israel on providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians, and only do so if Israel asks it to.

Goldman added that he is "100% absolutely" supportive of continued U.S. aid to Ukraine — which he said is a key area of contrast with O'Shea, his opponent — touting a traditionally hawkish line on the U.S.' interests in supporting its Eastern European ally.

"I think most antisemitism is, I would hope, is a just a lack of education and not having any knowledge why people are antisemitic," Goldman said, emphasizing the need to bring education on antisemitism into all levels of schooling. "We need to do a better job of educating our young on why antisemitism exists and why it shouldn't."

"As a student of history, we have to support Ukraine, and certainly we are doing so," he said. "We need to continue to do so with whatever weapons and ammunition we can... If Putin takes Ukraine, we all know he's not going to stop there. Then our troops, our men and women of the military, will be involved."

To combat antisemitism at home, Goldman pointed to Texas' Holocaust, Genocide and Antisemitism Commission, which conducts studies on antisemitism in Texas, provides educational resources to schools and organizations and organizes commemorative events, among other resources, as a potential model.

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Goldman is currently the only Jewish Republican in the Texas state legislature, which he said is a point of "great pride."

"We were educated at a young age that you give back to your community and raise money and gave it to other charities," Goldman said. "In my opinion, one of the unique things about our religion and what's special about it is we are taught from a young age, at least in the temple I grew up in, to get involved in your community."

He said those values are the reason he first announced his candidacy for the Statehouse a dozen years ago, "because I wanted to do more, not only for my community, but the state."

He said he'd also use the national bully pulpit to spread a message of why more Jews should vote Republican, to support Israel and a strong national defense.

The 12th District race is seen by some in the state as partly a proxy battle over the Texas House's politically explosive decision to impeach Attorney General Ken Paxton. O'Shea is a close friend of Paxton, according to the Texas Tribune, while Goldman supported his impeachment.

Goldman has the backing of traditional local political and business leaders, according to the Tribune, while O'Shea is running as a hard-line social and cultural conservative. O'Shea has said he'd join the House Freedom Caucus, which attempted to block legislation providing aid for U.S. allies from coming to the House floor. O'Shea began his campaign as a primary challenger to the incumbent, Granger.

Goldman said he's running for Congress because he wants to apply his 12 years of Texas Statehouse experience to work on national problems. He touts his "proven record" as a lawmaker and on local boards and commissions versus O'Shea, who he says "doesn't really have a record of doing anything for anybody in the community."

Goldman's top issues on the Hill would be border security, combating fentanyl, reducing the national debt and national defense.

He said his proudest accomplishment in Texas, and something he seeks to pass nationally, is Molly Jane's Law, a bill requiring police departments investigating reports of sexual assault to log them in a national criminal database, a program that seeks to help with stopping repeat offenders.

He said his proudest accomplishment in Texas, and something he seeks to pass nationally, is Molly Jane's Law, a bill requiring police departments investigating reports of sexual assault to log them in a national criminal database, a program that seeks to help with stopping repeat offenders.
Amid rampant antisemitism, KIND founder Daniel Lubetzky says ‘we’re talking past each other’

Lubetzky is set to appear on a panel about antisemitism at the Milken conference

By Gabby Deutch

LOS ANGELES — Before KIND bars were ubiquitous at drugstores and Starbucks checkout counters, kindness was a lesson that entrepreneur and KIND Snacks founder Daniel Lubetzky learned from his father, Roman, who survived Dachau.

After a stint as an AIPAC pro-Israel activist while a law student at Stanford in the early 1990s, Lubetzky turned toward peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians before starting KIND, the company known for its granola bars that was acquired by Mars Inc. in 2017 in a deal worth $5 billion. Now, Lubetzky, who was born and raised in Mexico City, is applying the same attitude that has animated his career in the business world toward calling out antisemitism and addressing the extremist rhetoric that has become a mainstay on U.S. college campuses during ongoing protests against Israel.

“I started realizing that we’re just talking past each other, and that was not succeeding,” Lubetzky, now an investor, said of his work in the Israel advocacy space. “There was just us sharing our side with our own friends and the other side sharing their side with their own friends, not really advancing anything or solving the problems.”

Speaking to Jewish Insider on Sunday on a sunny poolside deck in Beverly Hills ahead of the Milken Institute Global Conference, Lubetzky — a lifelong advocate for the Jewish people and for peace in the Middle East — outlined the ways in which the Oct. 7 Hamas attack had profoundly altered his view of the world.

“Even in all the most horrible stories that my dad told me,” Lubetzky said, “the stuff is horrific, but none of it is as horrific as what Hamas did.” And in the United States, the threats of antisemitism now “certainly have never been worse,” he added. Lubetzky is set to appear on a Milken panel about addressing antisemitism on Monday afternoon.

A solution to the polarization and deep division of this moment, Lubetzky argued, is to lower the temperature and figure out how to encourage people to speak to each other again. Universities and even businesses have failed at this, he said, leading to a leadership gap and a major problem for young people entering the workforce.

“There’s a big generation that, sadly, was really not served well, where they were not taught to be critical thinkers. They were not taught to be compassionate, they were not taught to be creative, they were not taught to be courageous,” said Lubetzky. “I do find that over the last 10-plus years, the culture — this neo-Marxist oppressor versus victim rigid ideology, that [if] you kind of question the morals, you get canceled and ostracized. This is super dangerous, not just to Jewish people but it’s dangerous to society.”

The prevalence of that ideology has led Lubetzky, a socially conscious entrepreneur who wrote about social entrepreneurship in a popular 2015 book, to think twice about his own values.

“The one silver lining of everything you’ve seen over the last several months is that we now woke up and realized that we cannot wish it away, we cannot just ignore it as just some stupid extremism. These rigid ideologies are very, very serious,” said Lubetzky. “We need to replace them with positive ideologies.”

Lubetzky declined to say whether he philanthropically supports any universities and if the anti-Israel campus protests have caused him to reconsider his giving. Still, he has no qualms about expressing his dissatisfaction: “If my kids were applying today, I would not want them applying to Columbia, for sure, UCLA and Harvard,” he said.

The general atmosphere at many elite universities has led Lubetzky to question their utility, and whether those are the graduates he should hire.

“I personally would think that a lot of employers will be much less excited about hiring people from any of those universities. And as a result, a lot less exceptional people are going to be applying to those universities. And as a result, a lot of those places are going to become mediocre over the coming years,” said Lubetzky. “A student that has taken extremist positions and demonstrated lack of compassion, curiosity civility,” Lubetzky continued — “they’re not likely to thrive in our environment.”
Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel took on a new resonance on Monday, nearly seven months to the day after the greatest atrocity against the Jewish people since the ones perpetrated by the Nazis.

There are currently 132,826 Holocaust survivors living in Israel, according to the Israeli Welfare Ministry. The events of Oct. 7 are estimated to have impacted 2,500 Holocaust survivors, including 1,894 who were evacuated from their homes, 554 of whom come from Israel's south. Of the evacuees, 238 have returned to their homes, mostly in Israel's south; 86 of the survivors who were evacuated have died since Oct. 7.

Penina Ben Yosef is one of those who escaped the Nazis and lived through Hamas's attack on Southern Israel. She spoke with Jewish Insider ahead of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Ben Yosef was born on Aug. 1, 1940 in Kovel, Poland – which is today in Ukraine – after the German invasion of Poland. Her father, a locomotive engineer, was forced to bring supplies to the war front and bring wounded soldiers back to Poland.

"My father knew what was happening to the Jews," Ben Yosef said, "and one time, when he was able to stop in our city, he called the whole family together, his parents and brothers, and told them to run away."

"They didn't believe anything would happen. They said that they had been in Poland for hundreds of years and had a lot of trouble with the goyim (non-Jews) and nothing particularly bad would happen now. When my father insisted, they said 'take your wife and daughter and go,' so he did. They stayed, and they were all killed," she said.

Penina's parents acquired false identification papers that did not say they were Jewish, and they fled to Russia, where her father was conscripted into the Red Army. After the war, they were deported because they were Polish citizens. Upon their return to Poland, her parents searched for relatives, finding none, and eventually made their way to a displaced persons camp in Austria.

"We were in the American zone and were able to emigrate to America, which my mother wanted very much," Ben Yosef said. "My father insisted that he will only go to the Land of Israel because he never wanted to be called a zhid [a derogatory term for Jew] again."

Ben Yosef and her parents made their way to Mandatory Palestine illegally on a freight ship in April 1948, one month before David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence.

Ben Yosef was one of the early residents of Kfar Maimon, one of several agricultural communities near the Gaza border established by alumni of the religious Zionist youth movement Bnei Akiva. She arrived as a teacher in the fledgling moshav in 1960, a year after Kfar Maimon's establishment, and raised two daughters there. She has 11 grandchildren, including two soldiers who fought in the war in the past seven months.

On Oct. 7, Ben Yosef had a broken leg in a cast and was unable to go to synagogue for Simchat Torah. She had heard the rocket sirens at 6:30 a.m. — "We're used to that," she said — but when they stopped, she sat by her window. As the morning progressed, she did not understand why she did not see the other residents of her religious village walking to synagogue.

"Then my daughter who lives [in Kfar Maimon] and a grandson who was a soldier on leave, but was back in uniform, came here to put me in the safe room because I couldn't walk on my leg," she said.

What Ben Yosef didn't know was that a battle was taking place by the entrance to Kfar Maimon. Hamas terrorists shot at a Yasur (Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion) helicopter, which made an emergency landing at the moshav. Dozens of soldiers emerged from the helicopter and fought off and killed about 60 terrorists in the village's environs, preventing them from entering Kfar Maimon.

"It was a great miracle," Ben Yosef said of the battle.

Meanwhile, Ben Yosef remained in her safe room. The following morning, her daughter, who has young children, left, while her 24-year-old grandchild stayed with Ben Yosef.

"I was there until Monday afternoon when I agreed to leave the house and the village," she said.

Ben Yosef said it was "very, very hard" for her to evacuate her home.

"I came to this region to work, and for 64 years and two days, I was there. Through all the wars and all the operations, I never left my home," she recalled.

Part of the difficulty for Ben Yosef, she said, was that "every other time I helped, I did things for other people. This time I was told that if I stayed, [the authorities] would..."
have to come and check on me and protect me. So I told myself, ‘Pnina, you’re already old, you did what you could. Clear the way for the young people.”

Ben Yosef left for Alon Shvut, a settlement near Jerusalem where she lived for more than four months and passed the time knitting hats for IDF soldiers. She returned home at the end of February.

“There wasn’t any damage to the village and no one was killed, thank God, so everyone is back,” Ben Yosef said.

At the same time, Ben Yosef said they hear constant “booms” and there are soldiers present at all times.

“It’s not that we are back in paradise, but we’re home,” she said.

Asked why she remains despite the dangers, Ben Yosef said: “If we’re not here, the Arabs will be here. There is no question. It’s clear that we have to be here. They call us the ‘Gaza envelope,’ but we are the envelope of Israel.”

Kfar Maimon is perhaps best known in Israel as a site of one of the major showdowns between opponents of the Gaza disengagement in 2005 and law enforcement, with tens of thousands of people demonstrating in the small village.

Asked whether she felt the disengagement contributed to the current situation, Ben Yosef recounted the “great relations” residents of the village had with Gazans.

“We would go to the market to buy clothes, shoes, and kitchenware because it was closer than Beersheba,” she recalled. “We would go to the beach there...When we drove north to Tel Aviv or something, we would drive by way of Gaza because it was faster.”

“It’s hard to believe such things now, but it was totally fine. The Palestinians worked here in the villages in the area and made a nice living. I’m sure their situation was much better than now,” she said.

Ben Yosef was pessimistic about the future of relations between Israel and Gaza.

“The hatred didn’t start now; it’s from the days of Ishmael and Isaac,” she said. “I do not see that there will ever be peace with the Arabs, because they don’t want us here... Somehow the world has to stop this radical Islam or it won’t just be Israel [in danger], it will be the whole world.”

As for the connection people are drawing between the Oct. 7 attack and the Holocaust, Ben Yosef said that “over the decades, fate brings us all kinds of ups and downs, and that was one of the most difficult low points, but to compare the days of the Holocaust and Oct. 7 — it’s not the same.”

“In the time of the Holocaust, we were spread all over the world and when we were massacred, we couldn’t do anything. Today we are in our own country with our own army. The losses were tremendous, the shock was great — but we held our heads high,” she said.

Ben Yosef took part in a project initiated by the Israel office of Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, called “Sharing Memories,” in which influencers upload videos of Holocaust survivors telling their stories. This year Meta Israel is highlighting survivors who were in Israel’s south on Oct. 7. The participants are mostly Israelis, so the videos are mostly in Hebrew, but actor Michael Rapaport produced content in English; they have an aggregate following of over 7.2 million people on Instagram. The project will raise funds for Israeli NGO Latet to provide essential needs to impoverished survivors, and the clips were available to watch on the VOD service of one of Israel’s biggest cable companies, Yes TV, starting on Sunday night.

Hamas murdered several Holocaust survivors on Oct. 7, including some of the 15 elderly people found dead in the street in Sderot, where they were waiting to board a bus to the Dead Sea. One of them was Moshe Ridler, 91, the oldest resident of Kibbutz Holit, who escaped a concentration camp when he was 11 years old.

The eldest of the hostages held by Hamas in Gaza, Shlomo Mantzur, 86, is a survivor of the Farhud, the 1941 pogrom against Jews in Baghdad, inspired partly by Nazi influence in Iraq. Farhud survivors are recognized as Holocaust survivors under Israeli law.

In the Farhud, Shlomo’s sister, Hadassa Lazar, told a Knesset committee earlier this year, the Iraqis “murdered, raped, tortured babies, kidnapped, decapitated... It was the Kristallnacht of Iraqi Jewry and the world was silent. Shlomo saw things that stayed with him his whole life. We used to think ‘never again’ – it did not occur to us that such things could happen again when we have a sovereign state.”

Some of the other hostages have close relatives who are Holocaust survivors, including Michael Kuperstein, 82, the grandfather of Bar Kuperstein, 22, who was kidnapped from the Nova music festival, and Tsili Wenkert, 82, whose grandson, Omer Wenkert, was taken from the festival and appeared in a hostage video released in January. Bella Chaim is the grandmother of Yotam Chaim, who was kidnapped to Gaza and accidentally killed by IDF soldiers. Ruth Haran, 89, had seven relatives kidnapped and three murdered; her grandson-in-law Tal is still being held hostage in Gaza and her daughter Sharon, daughter-in-law Shoshan, grandchildren Noam and Adi, and great-grandchildren Neve and Yahel were kidnapped by Hamas and released in November.

Haran, who was born in Romania and spent years fleeing the Nazis, survived the Oct. 7 attack on Kibbutz Be’eri and said that “people who survived the massacre talked about death, murder, women raped and the destruction of our community. The whole trauma of being a Holocaust survivor came back to me...As a Holocaust survivor, I know how to deal with pain, but this time I don’t know how to cope.”