‘Opposite of inclusive’: A look inside the increasingly hostile environment for Jewish therapists

Jewish therapists say they’ve been subject to doxing, litmus tests, exclusion and harassment by fellow mental health professionals since Oct. 7

By Gabby Deutch

When someone posted in a private Facebook group for Chicago therapists in March, asking whether anyone would be willing to work with a Zionist client, several Jewish therapists quickly responded, saying they would be happy to be connected to this person.

What happened next sparked fear and outrage among Jewish therapists in Chicago and across the country, and illuminated the atmosphere of intimidation and harassment faced by many Jews in the mental health world who won’t disavow Zionism. Those who replied, offering their services to this unnamed client, soon found themselves added to a list of supposedly Zionist therapists that was shared in a group called “Chicago Anti-Racist Therapists.”

“I’ve put together a list of therapists/practices with Zionist affiliations that we should avoid referring clients to,” Heba Ibrahim Joudeh, the document’s author, wrote. (A request for comment sent to the practice she runs with her husband did not receive a response.) The administrator of the anti-racist group chimed in, praising the list as a way “to be transparent about clinicians who promote and facilitate White supremacy via Zionism.” The comments came quickly: “Amazing, thank you,” one person wrote. “Omg a place I was looking at is on here,” another wrote, with angry emojis.

The only trait shared by the 26 therapists on the list is that they are Jewish. “When I saw this whole list created and my name on the list, I was so confused and in disbelief about how, in 2024, this is considered OK. It was a list of Jews,” said Anna Finkelshtein, a licensed clinical social worker in Chicago who immigrated from Russia as a child. “I do not post publicly about the conflict or about Israel at all, ever. It feels like the only way to feel safe as a Jew in the mental health field is to publically speak out against Israel and condemn it and call it a genocide.”

The anti-Zionist blacklist is the most
extreme example of an anti-Israel wave that has swept the mental health field since the Oct. 7 Hamas terror attacks and the resulting war in Gaza, which has seen the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians. More than a dozen Jewish therapists from across the country who spoke to Jewish Insider described a profession ostensibly rooted in compassion, understanding and sensitivity that has too often dropped those values when it comes to Jewish and Israeli providers and clients.

At best, these therapists say their field has been willing to turn a blind eye to the antisemitism that they think is too rampant to avoid. At worst, they worry the mental health profession is becoming inhospitable to Jewish practitioners whose support for Israel puts them outside the prevailing progressive views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“The goal in therapy is to provide compassionate care to whoever walks through your door,” Dean McKay, a professor of psychology at Fordham University, told JI. “As part of our training — I don’t remember in my own training, and it’s not the way that I train anybody else, to ever say, ‘Look, here are the people who are worthy of our care.’”

“We all worried that it could get this bad, but I don’t think any of us were actually expecting it to happen,” said Halina Brooke, a licensed professional counselor in Phoenix, Ariz. Four years ago, she created an organization called the Jewish Therapist Collective to build community among Jewish professionals and raise the alarm about an undercurrent of antisemitism in the field. “Once Oct. 7 hit, we’ve all been in crisis mode since literally that morning, and the stories that have come in from colleagues and about their clients have been horrifying.”

The antisemitism problem in the mental health profession is more than just workplace gossip. Jewish therapists — and Jewish clients — worry about how the growing anti-Israel orthodoxy will show up in clients’ sessions, and if it will affect their care, especially at a time when more people than ever are seeking therapy. A Gallup survey showed that in 2022, 23% of American adults had visited a mental health professional in the prior year, compared to 13% in 2004.

“This is where I think there’s some real serious problems of people either not being able to get appropriate care, or even if they do get appropriate care, whether they feel that they can continue it because of being judged,” Dean McKay, a professor of psychology at Fordham University, told JI. “The goal in therapy is to provide compassionate care to whoever walks through your door. As part of our training — I don’t remember in my own training, and it’s not the way that I train anybody else, to ever say, ‘Look, here are the people who are worthy of our care.’”

Regional listservs are awash with therapists seeking referrals for potential clients. They’re often identity-focused, like queer people seeking LGBTQ therapists or a Black woman looking for a female therapist of color. Lately, more of them have included in their list of requirements — alongside the insurance the person has and what type of therapy they want — a disclaimer that the therapist should be pro-Palestine or anti-Zionist.

The debate over Zionism within the mental health field reflects a bigger, thornier question that is still being litigated in the profession: Should therapists be neutral health-care providers, sitting and listening on a couch while keeping all details of their personal lives and political leanings private? Or at a time when clients are seeking therapists who look and think like them, is there a role for therapists to play in bringing their own experiences and beliefs into the therapy session?

Ira Finkel, a licensed clinical social worker in Chicago whose name appeared on the blacklist, said he had no idea why its authors decided to add him. “I don’t make comments one way or the other, and never felt that it is appropriate for therapists to do so as it can be detrimental to the therapeutic relationship. My clients’ philosophical views never matter to me as they are coming to me for help,” Finkel told JI. Hannah Tishman, a licensed clinical social worker in Manhattan, said she found it difficult when one client said they didn’t know what was true and what was false about Oct. 7, but she didn’t respond with her own opinion. “I’m not there to provide facts or information. That’s not my job,” she said.

In recent years, the mental health field — which encompasses a diverse array of practitioners, including social workers, licensed counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists and more — has embraced a vision of the practice that relies on a social justice framework, leaning heavily into the anti-racism worldview that was brought to the fore in 2020, after the murder of George Floyd.

Many Jewish therapists see themselves as stewards of that worldview. They want Black people who come to them for therapy to feel comfortable and to know that they have an ally sitting across from them. (One of the Jewish therapists named on the Chicago list asserted that “there’s space for Jews to be anti-racists,” but that Jews should also “be part of that framework.”)

Michelle, a Jewish queer therapist on the West Coast, has for years described herself as a social-justice-focused therapist. But that began to change after Oct. 7, when the professional organizations she turned to for support were silent, or issued only tepid statements after the Hamas massacre — or, in the case of at least one colleague, outright supported Hamas. (Michelle is a pseudonym; she requested that her real name and location be omitted to maintain clients’ confidentiality, and to avoid backlash from colleagues in her liberal city.)

“They’ve just been so extremely bent against Israel, and the opposite of inclusive,” Michelle, a Jewish queer therapist on the West Coast said of the Inclusive Therapists organization. “Therapists who are being labeled ‘Zios’ are being ostracized.”

“I think I just saw social justice as being conscious of systemic oppression, and being an anti-racist,” said Michelle. Putting that on the website allows clients to feel like they can talk about it, or that they’re not working with someone who is racist or doesn’t have those similar values. But I think it’s now representing something different for me.”

The current environment has created a culture of paranoia. Worried about
antisemitism. Michelle no longer describes herself as Jewish on her online profile. When a client drops out of therapy, is that because they no longer need care? Or because they don't want to see a Jewish Zionist therapist? She has no way of knowing.

Inclusive Therapists, an organization started in 2019 with the stated goal of helping people find a “therapist who gets you,” allows prospective clients to search a database of therapists filtered by expertise (like gender-affirming care or racial justice) or “cultural knowledge” (such as Middle Eastern, Jewish or East Asian cultures). Michelle still has several badges from Inclusive Therapists on the bottom of her website — “LGBTQ+ Affirming,” “Culturally Responsive,” “Social Justice Oriented” and “All Bodies, Identities, and Abilities” — but she recently quit the organization over actions it has taken since Oct. 7.

“They've just been so extremely bent against Israel, and the opposite of inclusive,” said Michelle. “Therapists who are being labeled ‘Zios’ are being ostracized.” (The term “Zio” as a slur for Zionists or Jews was popularized by former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke.)

Social media communities like Inclusive Therapists have for many mental health care providers become a crucial source of support, networking and business development, and a way to counter the often-solitary work of being a therapist in a private practice. So when they adopt a controversial political stance, it can be crushing for longtime members who turned to the groups for community.

All Inclusive Therapists’ blog posts by Jewish authors since October have come only from anti-Zionist Jews. Before October, the website had never published anything related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; now, a link at the top of the page calls on therapists to sign an open letter seeking confrontations with antisemitism, which condemned “shaming and bullying Jewish people calling for Ceasefire.” It also urged members to “differentiate between antisemitism and anti-Zionism” and speak out about “the dangers of conflating.” (Eighty percent of American Jews say caring about Israel is an essential or important part of what being Jewish means to them, according to a 2021 Pew survey.)

In December, Inclusive Therapists posted an infographic on the group's Instagram page, with 63,000 followers, that said, “Palestine is a moral litmus test for the world.”

Therapists in Private Practice (TIPP), a private Facebook group with 25,000 members, is a crucial part of the online network therapists turn to for professional networking and support. The group asks potential members to answer a series of questions proving that they are legitimate mental health professionals. They must list their full name, degree, license type, location and website. They are also asked a single question about politics.

“This is an anti oppression based group,” the group states. “We examine privilege and engage in discourse related to dismantling oppressive systems in the field. We support BLM [Black Lives Matter] and are Pro Palestine. Are you open and willing to support this direction?” Answering the question is not optional. This prompt was added at some point after Oct. 7.

"The biggest issue is that anyone providing empathy to Jews for any reason is seen as anti-justice, anti-brown, anti-Palestinian, anti-advocacy,” said Brooke, the Jewish Therapist Collective founder, who was kicked out of the TIPP group. "If anyone's having an issue about feeling alone being Jewish, you get spammed in the comments about, 'Free Palestine.'"

TIPP is far from the only forum to target those supportive of Israel. This spring, Tishman, the New York therapist, offered a free trauma-informed therapy workshop for Jewish college students facing antisemitism. She posted about it in a New Jersey counseling group on Facebook, hoping to spread the word. One therapist responded that there is no antisemitism on college campuses.

“There were a few comments that were really aggressive,” Tishman said. “She totally gaslit me. But then I got a lot of support from other Jewish therapists.”

"I used to approach the field of psychology thinking that people are innately good,” Ayelet Schafir-Hirshfeld, an Israeli-American therapist who has been working in California, said. “We have this question in philosophy. We have all of these philosophers arguing about human nature. And it changed my view. I
started feeling that I’ve been very naive, that I didn’t see it before or that I was blind to it. Maybe people are not as good as I thought. It was and still is heartbreaking.”

The issue isn’t confined to Facebook groups and Instagram posts. Ayelet Schafir-Hirshfeld, an Israeli-American therapist who has been working in California for more than a decade, described a total lack of compassion and support from colleagues after Oct. 7.

“I was shocked when Oct. 7 happened. I thought that I would get some, I guess, empathy from colleagues. It was nonexistent,” Schafir-Hirshfeld said. “Instead, the response was hostility everywhere simply for being Israeli and being viewed as an apartheid aggressor, a white supremacist, as if you’re lying about things that happened, as if they didn’t happen, just because you are Jewish and Israeli.”

The lack of understanding for Israelis and Jews she witnessed after Oct. 7 has led her to reconsider the deeply held beliefs that form the basis of her approach to psychology.

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After the Oct. 7 attacks, Jewish practitioners noticed that leading professional organizations were much slower to issue a response than on previous issues of concern, like racism or homophobia. They recognized a double standard in language that equivocated about the violence in the Middle East while the same groups were precise and pointed when calling out discrimination faced by other marginalized communities.

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“Comparing the statements of the APA and the AJPA, the APA’s statement was released before the AJPA’s. The APA’s statement firmly condemned and unequivocally condemned the terrorist attacks in Israel and the Palestinian territories. It also condemned the targeting of civilians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The statement criticized the actions of Hamas and other armed groups, and called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.”

Compare that to earlier in 2023, when the APA “decried” a Supreme Court decision viewed as discriminating against same-sex couples and “deeply regret[ed]” the Supreme Court’s rejection of race-based affirmative action hours after each decision was released.

The APAs statement prompted a firm rebuttal from the Association of Jewish Psychologists, who said they are “deeply disappointed and terribly saddened that our professional association could not more forcefully and unequivocally condemn the horrific acts of barbarism against the Jewish people of the State of Israel.” An APA spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Carole Cox, a professor in Fordham’s graduate school of social service, has been researching antisemitism in the field by surveying hundreds of Jewish social workers. The results have not left her feeling hopeful.

After Cox published an article about antisemitism, a human rights class at Fordham began incorporating it into the syllabus. One student mentioned it to Cox and said, “Oh, we read your article on anti—what is it?” She couldn’t think of the name for antisemitism.

“She didn’t even know what it was. It’s not taught,” said Cox. “The most upsetting thing is that this is social work ... Social workers are taught to be sensitive. And somehow it ain’t happening.”

“My hope for the future of the field of mental health and therapy is severely damaged at this point,” one therapist named on the Chicago blacklist said. “I really don’t feel good about the direction that this has been going because all of the rules that we’ve decided about social justice just don’t seem to apply to certain groups of people.”

Against this backdrop of discrimination, communities for Jewish therapists have grown. Anecdotally, some Jewish therapists who spoke to JI reported an increase in the number of Jewish clients who are coming to see them after Oct. 7. Others said they, too, are seeking out Jewish clients, so that they can feel safe knowing their sessions take place with a shared understanding of Zionism and antisemitism. (Therapy forums on Reddit are full of posts from people questioning how to deal with a therapist who takes a different stance on the war. One post in a Jewish forum: “My therapist denied the [Oct. 7] massacre to my face.”)

“The secular therapy world has felt pretty unsafe,” said one therapist in Washington, D.C., who since Oct. 7 has begun considering a career shift into more distinctly Jewish spaces. “Some Jewish collectives have been formed out of feeling like there isn’t a safe space anymore in the secular groups to just be Jewish, and just be a Jewish therapist without being attacked and without having to be constantly vigilant about what people are saying and how they’re saying it.”

One of the therapists named on the Chicago blacklist is considering leaving the field entirely to work at a Jewish summer camp.

“My hope for the future of the field of mental health and therapy is severely damaged at this point,” the therapist said. “I really don’t feel good about the direction that this has been going because all of the rules that we’ve decided about social justice just don’t seem to apply to certain groups of people.”

Sleepaway camp, at least, is fun.

“The one positive is if they really wanted to destroy Judaism, then the better way to have done it would have been to just leave the Jews alone,” the Chicago therapist said. “All this has done is reignite, I think, a real passion for a lot of people who previously just didn’t feel that way to feel really strongly about their Judaism.”
Israel is set to launch a travel authorization program for foreign visitors to the country, beginning with a pilot program starting on Saturday for travelers arriving from the U.S. and Germany.

The program, which is similar to those used in the U.S., Canada and Australia, will require non-Israeli passport holders traveling to the country to obtain electronic travel authorization (ETA-IL) – through israel-entry.piba.gov.il – before setting off on their trip.

In a statement this week, Israel's Population and Immigration Authority said the new program was aimed at improving security, immigration and general services. The ministry said it would “help the authorities to obtain information about the passenger before he or she even boards the plane, and if a problem arises that prevents him or her from entering Israel, the passenger will be referred to the Israeli embassy in his or her country of residence.”

“It will prevent any unpleasant surprises for passengers who land at the border and are refused entry,” the statement said.

Israel's Ministry of Tourism also explained that the new system would speed up online confirmations and “allow for a simplified, stress-free entry process through electronic check-in machines when visiting Israel.”

Over the past two years, as Israel slowly reopened its borders following the COVID-19 pandemic, tourists arriving at Ben Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv had been subjected to lengthy waits at passport control, while Israelis with biometric passports could whiz through using electronic scanning machines.

The ministry said that starting on July 1, travelers from all visa-exempt countries will be able to take advantage of the pilot program, and from Aug. 1, the new system will be instituted as the new entry protocol for all incoming travelers from visa-exempt countries.

Once approved for travel through the system, visitors will be permitted to stay in Israel for up to 90 days and the authorization will remain valid for up to two years, or until the passport used to apply for the ETA-IL has expired.

The ministry also emphasized that during the pilot phase June 1-July 31, the $7 application fee will be waived.

“As a tech-forward country, streamlining the entry process with the new online ETA-IL application is a natural progression,” said Eyal Carlin, commissioner of tourism to North America in Israel's Tourism Ministry. “It will allow for smoother arrivals and more time for travelers to enjoy all Israel has to offer.”

“While we are currently in a challenging time, we encourage those with an interest in visiting the country to take note of the new entry process as they continue their travel planning,” he said.

Israel first announced that it would be implementing a travel authorization system for all foreign visitors, including U.S. citizens, last year as it was in the final phase of applying for the U.S.' coveted Visa Waiver Program (VWP).

In September 2023, after more than three decades of attempts, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Secretary of State Tony Blinken announced that Israel's application to the VWP had been successful. On Nov. 30, the country was fully incorporated into the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), allowing Israeli citizens to apply for visa-free travel to the United States for tourism or business purposes for up to 90 days. ♦

By Ruth Marks Eglash
Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA) renounced his association with Harvard University over its “inability to stand up for the Jewish community” during his Yeshiva University commencement address on Wednesday, removing the crimson hood representing his alma mater while on stage.

Fetterman made the gesture early in his address, which culminated in him receiving the Presidential Medallion, the private Orthodox university’s highest honor, for his advocacy on behalf of Israel and the Jewish people. He joked that he didn’t deserve to be in the same company as previous recipients of the award, describing himself as “just a senator with a big mouth that happens to be committed to standing with Israel.”

The Pennsylvania senator, who has emerged since Oct. 7 as one of Israel’s strongest allies in his party, said he had been “reflecting” on his “last graduation, and that was literally a quarter century ago. I was graduating from Harvard University.”

“Today, I have been profoundly disappointed with Harvard’s inability to stand up for the Jewish community after Oct. 7. Personally, I do not fundamentally believe that it is right for me to wear this today,” Fetterman said while pointing to his hood, which he then removed from around his neck.

The move sparked audible gasps and subsequent cheers from the crowd.

Fetterman, who graduated from the Harvard Kennedy School in 1999 with a master’s in public policy, vowed to remain a staunch supporter of Israel and fight for the release of the hostages, pointing to a memento given to him by a family member.

“Of course, we cannot ignore the somber context of today. In fact, on my wrist I’m wearing the wristband from the Nova music festival. It was given to me by a family member of someone that was taken hostage. If you look at it, it reads Oct. 7, 2023. It’s a constant reminder of the horrors of that day,” Fetterman said. “The Jewish community everywhere deserves our support and I promise you will always have mine. And I will not stop speaking out until every last hostage is brought back home.”

The Democratic senator has bucked his party’s shift away from Israel in recent months, refusing to waver in his support for continued offensive military aid despite the objections of some far left colleagues. He has also led on legislation combating antisemitism on college campuses alongside Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA).

He told the graduating class that one of his “most proud moments as a United States senator was voting for billions in aid for Israel with no conditions to allow Israel to push back at that singular evil force.”

Fetterman also urged students to take some time to celebrate their accomplishments and embrace the joy they felt on this day despite the tragedy that has unfolded in Israel and Gaza on and since Oct. 7.

“Joy can coexist with tragedy,” Fetterman said. “And today, never forget that today is a day of celebration for all of you and all of these families here.”

By Emily Jacobs
Photography project empowers, gives voice to students at Tel Aviv special needs high school

Principal of Ironi Neve Tzedek says the program, which started eight years ago with support from the Waldman family, gives students a feeling of success and brings out hidden talents

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Hands raised to the sky, a holy book, a man wrapped in a tallit and tefillin, a statue of Jesus on the cross bathed in the yellow light of stained-glass windows, a person playing a drum.

These are some of the photographic interpretations of the concept of prayer — put on display at the Neve Schechter Center for Contemporary Jewish Culture and Arts on Tuesday — by the students of Tel Aviv’s Ironi Neve Tzedek, a high school for students with learning disabilities.

For eight years, the high school has been encouraging students to explore photography. In recent years, this has expanded to other forms of visual art as well, including painting, graffiti, video art and animation, all of which were also displayed at Neve Schechter, a compound on the edge of Tel Aviv’s tony Neve Tzedek neighborhood that contains a Masorti/Conservative synagogue, a gallery space and a cafe.

The photography program was made possible with financial support from Adir and Tamara Waldman, who immigrated to Neve Tzedek from the United States and developed ties to the school as part of an effort to connect and strengthen the local community. (Though it is still called Ironi Neve Tzedek, this year the school relocated to a new location in the Bitsaron neighborhood of eastern Tel Aviv.)

“Our students have learning disabilities, which makes it hard for them to express themselves verbally,” the school’s principal, Tirza Judelewicz, told eJewishPhilanthropy at the exhibit opening. “So we looked for tools that would allow them to express themselves. The camera is particularly available, especially today when everyone has a smartphone.”

Judelewicz said the Waldmans purchased the cameras for the school and continue to support the photography program, including by professionally printing the students’ photographs and having them put on display at Neve Schechter. Two of the Waldmans’ children have also done bar and bat mitzvah projects with the school, they noted.

Ordinarily, the photography exhibit is shown for several weeks; this year, due to logistical issues, it was only displayed for one day before having to be taken down, but a digital version of the exhibit will be put online shortly.

“The kids see their photographs printed professionally, and then they can take them home and show their families. It’s really cool,” Adir Waldman told eJP on the sidelines of the exhibit opening.

The Waldmans’ support allowed the school to create an arts track for the student, which then developed into a more practical communications track, after the school determined that the more theoretical arts curriculum did not work as well with the students, Judelewicz said.

Getting misty-eyed at times, Judelewicz said the photography and arts classes gave the students a much-needed boost. She noted many of them come from Tel Aviv’s lower socioeconomic neighborhoods and communities, including children of foreign workers and asylum seekers. (The photographs on display also reflected that multicultural milieu, with many of the images featuring Christian and Muslim iconography.)

“It empowers them. We’ve found students who are very, very, very talented,” she said. “They experience success, and that is the most important thing for us. Because they face so much frustration and so much non-success and rejection. And this gives them a platform and a feeling of being capable.”

Tamara Waldman, who said she was partially drawn to the school because her own brother has a learning disability, also noted this point, saying photography is an area where the students are on equal footing with their peers. “It’s very empowering for them,” she said.

Indeed, this year for the first time, Ironi Neve Tzedek partnered with another high school, Tel Aviv’s storied Gymnasia Herzliya, whose arts-track students also had photographs displayed. The only difference between the schools’ submissions is that Ironi Neve Tzedek’s photos generally clung to a more literal expression of the concept of prayer, while the Gymnasia Herzliya students opted for more abstract offerings (a slash of sky between two black buildings; two empty yellow chairs [the symbol of the hostages in Gaza] on an empty stretch of beach.)

A mother of one of the students involved who spoke at the event, but asked not to be named, agreed with Waldman and Judelewicz about the power of the photography project for her son.

“The photography project empowers him so much,” she said. “He waits for the day to start just so he can do photography. It does so much, so much. He’s always with a camera now.”

♦
Building a ‘culture worth fighting for’ after Oct. 7, one writing workshop at a time

“Writing on the Wall” is a new creative writing community founded to ‘make something of our desolation’ following the Hamas attack

By Lahav Harkov

It was the cans of tuna that author Gila Green hoarded in her safe room that finally unlocked her case of writer’s block after the trauma of Oct. 7.

Green took part in a workshop earlier this month that is part of “Writing on the Wall,” an online community aimed at producing art that reflects the complexities of Jewish and Israeli life at this time.

The workshop led by Bar-Ilan University English professor William Kolbrener and novelist and Ph.D. student Ronit Eitan was titled “Haven’t the Jewish People Suffered Enough”—how humor “transforms tragedy into laughter.”

Humor, Kolbrener told attendees, “is a long Jewish tradition. That’s how Jews deal with tragedy.”

The workshop began with a reading, a selection from a David Foster Wallace essay in Rolling Stone about life in Bloomington, Ill. after 9/11. A summary that does not do the selection justice: Everyone had American flags up, Wallace wanted one, too, but the stores were sold out. A sympathetic convenience store owner saw his distress and gave him construction paper and markers to draw his own flag.

The writing prompt was to take an ordinary object and use it to say something about life in Bloomington, “something of our desolation” following the hostage posters and her response—she had never shouted aloud.

“Writers were on fire,” Kolbrener later wrote about that workshop. “Their stories: a grad student home with four young children, whose friend did not. But they found words, poems and visual art on its website.

After Oct. 7, Kolbrener, who was academic director of the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy, recounted that the idea of publishing another paper on antisemitism did not feel sufficient to him: “I thought, ‘the house is burning down.’”

Kolbrener, who has taught English literature and creative writing at Bar-Ilan University for nearly 30 years, led “an impromptu writing workshop” on Oct. 17, for students who would not be able to return to classes for over two months.

“Writers were on fire,” Kolbrener later wrote about that workshop. “Their stories: a grad student home with four young children, her husband ‘somewhere’ in Gaza(588,571),(770,605); a writer, her son-in-law, identifying the still burning bodies of Kibbutz Beeri; the undergrad who stayed home from the [Nova] rave, but whose friend did not. But they found words, and images – to transmute the horror into art.”

Kolbrener and Eitan were then inspired to start Writing on the Wall, which has held a series of workshops and publishes essays, poems and visual art on its website.

The idea, Kolbrener wrote, is “to make something of our desolation, of that day,” citing precedents in Jewish history: “The desolation caused by the sin of the Golden Calf led to the second tablets, and human creativity. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem led to the creation at Yavne of the Oral Law, the beginning of the Mishnah and Talmud and Midrash, the inspired poetry of the rabbis.”

Kolbrener wanted to create “a different kind of community,” a post-Oct. 7 creative outlet.

“I live very close to Mt. Herzl, the military cemetery [in Jerusalem],” he recalled. “At the beginning of the war, there were funerals, day after day….thousands of people came and there was absolute quiet and silence…. You felt the resilience of mourning.”

Yet Kolbrener and Eitan felt that they could not remain silent.

Eitan compared the situation to the Eurovision Song Contest, in which Israeli singer Eden Golan’s first submission, “October Rain,” was rejected on the grounds that it was too political, so she had to sing a neutered version of the song, “Hurricane.” After that, Golan was bullied by other participants and forced to stay in her room while she wasn’t performing due to security concerns.

“We cannot take ourselves out of the game,” Eitan said. “Even if we’re booted, we need to be there. It’s a metaphor. We cannot be silent; we cannot be afraid; we need our voices out there.”

Doing so is “really urgent,” Kolbrener said. “We cannot fight on the front, but we can build a culture that is worth saving, worth fighting for.”

Kolbrener, who is religious and lives in Jerusalem, and Eitan, who is secular and lives in Tel Aviv, highlighted the importance of sharing different voices at this time.

Eitan said that she “didn’t see [herself] as a collective, but I have no choice. I was pushed into that. I had to reconstruct my identity, everything I thought I was after Oct. 7. The rules have changed.”

“This is an opportunity for us to find our voices again. We’re very different,” she added.
Kolbrener said that “no matter how bad it seems in the newspapers in terms of internal rifts, when you walk in the streets you feel 100% unity.”

Still, he said: “We don’t want false unity – that’s dangerous. We are a growing community of people who may not share the same lifestyle or values, but notwithstanding our differences, we all have what to say about this experience.”

Green told Jewish Insider after the workshop that she came into it with the idea that it would help her “regulate and cope with difficult times” as someone who often uses writing to process thoughts and feelings.

“Since Oct. 7, I’ve found myself unable to write,” she lamented. “It might simply be because we are still living through these events. It’s ongoing and there isn’t enough psychological space to write about it yet. Just when you start to process the chaos... something else hits you hard. The pace and enormity of it all can be overwhelming.”

Erica Landis, who began writing professionally after the death of her son in a swimming pool accident, said that “writing has always been how I process my experience in the world... I had no trouble pouring my heart out in my own personal horror.”

Oct. 7, however, “was a bigger horror,” Landis found herself “distracted in a way I’d never experienced before... I found myself having trouble concentrating on my work. It all felt frivolous... I felt that coping mechanism has been taken away from me. I was unable to put this all into words... I was truly afraid I’d never be able to write again.”

Landis said she felt she “simply had to” sign up for the workshop.

“I was hoping for and expecting some ‘writerly tricks,’ I guess, on how to break down the million moving parts of this pain and anger,” she said, “but I think so far I’ve learned that there are no tricks.”

Still, Landis appreciated that the workshop was about the craft of writing, leaving the participants to work through their emotions themselves before putting them on the page.

Green said she was “pleasantly surprised” to be able to write something during the session, and that it was a “significant step forward” for her.

She found the piece about torn-down hostage posters resonant, despite living in Israel where the posters are mostly left intact.

“It’s reassuring to know that others are experiencing similar things and value writing as an outlet,” Green said.

Landis said that the experience “validated the difficulties I was having as a writer... that this is a pivotal horror.”

She was also “thankful to have this virtual room full of safe people (Jews or not) who don’t want to kill me,” Landis said.

“While Oct 7 hurts me down to my DNA, I am terrified of the fact that people – no matter their beliefs – are not horrified and angered by the pure evil and brutality. So, I guess the answer to how the workshop has helped me process is by validating the impossibility of Oct. 7 and the world response not making sense. And from there, we will do our best to bear witness... by recording it all the best we can. Breaking it all down into writing exercises that may spur an idea, a connection, or simply a sentence is very helpful,” Landis said.

How the ICC, ICJ rulings could have deeper, long-term implications for Israel

While the rulings are unlikely to have any impact on the war in Gaza, they are another blow to Israel’s diplomatic standing, analysts and legal experts tell Jewish Insider

By Ruth Marks Eglash

On the surface, the separate decisions issued last week by the world’s top two legal forums slamming Israel’s military conduct in Gaza are unlikely to have an immediate impact on the nearly eight-month-old war sparked by Hamas’ brutal Oct. 7 terrorist attacks on southern Israel.

Over the weekend, Israel’s military said it was continuing to battle militants in all parts of the Gaza Strip and on Monday announced it had killed two senior Hamas operatives in an attack that Palestinians said killed dozens of civilians. Hamas also showed no signs of slowing down its assault, firing a barrage of rockets from the Strip’s southernmost city of Rafah into central Israel on Sunday, causing damage to civilian homes as far away as Herzliya.

Despite the continued fighting, however, the International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan’s intention to seek arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant – alongside Hamas leaders; and the International Court of Justice’s demand for Israel to “immediately halt its military offensive, and any other action in the Rafah Governorate,” could have broader implications for Israel’s image, its diplomatic standing and its relationships with close allies, including the U.S, in both the short and long term.

The decisions, which Israeli officials
Jerusalem Post

The average person in the world sees this complete legal crackdown on Israel, they're not going into the details in the weeds, and it's just an extremely huge blow to the image of the State of Israel," said Yaakov Katz, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute.

“We are seeing diplomatic relations being cut by some countries, we're seeing trade sanctions by some countries, we're seeing limits on military exports, so on the whole I can say that this has not been Israel's finest hour internationally,” he continued.

Yuval Shany, a professor in the faculty of law at Hebrew University and a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, told JI.

“Suggesting that the prime minister of Israel is a war criminal and perpetrator of crimes against humanity – that really is a low point for the country,” he said.

Yaakov Katz, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, concurred, saying that from an “image perspective” the ICC and ICJ announcements were “really bad” for Israel.

“The moment that the world – and your average person – hears that Israel, that its leaders, [could have] arrest warrants issued against them, or that the ICJ says they need to stop a military operation but they're not listening... it just looks really bad,” he said.

“The average person in the world sees this complete legal crackdown on Israel, they're not going into the details in the weeds, and it's just an extremely huge blow to the image of the State of Israel,” added Katz, a former editor-in-chief of The Jerusalem Post.

The author of three books on Israeli military affairs, Katz continued that the courts’ decisions could also have “a long-term impact on things that we don’t yet feel, such as investments and tourism.”

“We’re already seeing this with the researchers and academics,” he noted. “So, all this has a widespread domino effect that is very hard to put your finger on, but it definitely has an impact.”

While Israel has vowed to fight each decision in a legal sense, Katz said it was paramount for “Israel to fix its relationship with the United States,” which in recent months has appeared strained over the Rafah offensive and the question of governance in postwar Gaza.

If Israel moves ahead with the Rafah operation, which appears highly likely, then the ruling by the ICJ, a United Nations-appointed court, Israel will likely be subjected to another Security Council resolution, Katz explained.

In such a scenario, he added, “Israel will be extremely dependent on the United States to veto that resolution.”

The White House declined to comment directly on the ICJ ruling on Friday, with a National Security Council spokesman saying only “we’ve been clear and consistent on our position on Rafah,” without elaborating, according to reports.

Alan Baker, the director of the Institute for Contemporary Affairs at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Israel’s former ambassador to Canada, said that the decisions issued by these two international bodies – which were established to solve global disputes and prosecute individuals accused of committing the most heinous crimes – could end up having an inverse effect on the courts themselves.

“What the Palestinians have done from the very beginning is to target the ICC as good grounds for politicization against Israel,” he said. “Because they haven’t been able to physically eliminate Israel, they found a very good way of carrying out lawfare to undermine Israel’s legitimacy and turning the ICC into their own backyard Israel-bashing tribunal.”

“No one has ever done this to any other country,” he said. “Now this is very harmful because the last thing the ICC has wanted is for it to be perceived as being another Israel-bashing tribunal,” Baker said.

“We have to remember that the ICJ is a U.N. body and like the U.N., it also suffers from the same element of politicization that all the international community suffers from,” he said of the other court, noting that its president, Nawaf Salam, was a Lebanese diplomat and stating that he should have recused himself based on a conflict of interests.

Shany also said that the courts’ rulings were politically divisive and had likely left Western capitals feeling uneasy.

“I think there is a sense that some of these international bodies are perhaps becoming too assertive and too aggressive in the way they implement their mandates – and that this might not only be unfair to Israel but could come back to haunt them [other Western countries] sooner rather than later,” he said. “If Western states, including the U.S., are viewing the ICC – and the ICJ – decisions in this way, then the rulings could even actually benefit Israel on some level.”

The decision was sufficiently ambiguous to give Israel some wiggle or maneuver room, but in practical terms, I think it would be wise for Israel to continue the operation with additional measures of protection, so it can at least show the international community and the ICJ that it is taking the concerns raised by the court really seriously,” said Yuval Shany, a professor in the faculty of law at Hebrew University and a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute.

While there is a growing possibility of pushback against the courts and their decisions among Israel’s allies, Baker said the proceedings were not likely to go away anytime soon. The ICC case, he said, is a continuation of a very long line of complaints and petitions that have been filed to the court by the Palestinians since 2015 when they were admitted as a full member state to the Rome Statute, which governs the court. And the ICJ ruling was part of a petition filed by South Africa accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza.

While the ICJ ruling was widely reported as a call for Israel to halt its war against Hamas, both Baker and Shany highlighted that the decision was far more nuanced. They both pointed to dissenting opinions...
The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

When The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures opened its doors in the fall of 2021, it had something for cinephiles of all ages and inclinations. One room highlighted Oscar winners, including some intricate costumes and facial prosthetics. One gallery profiled the films of Spike Lee; another, the work of Pedro Almodovar. And overhead, “Bruce the Shark” — a.k.a. Jaws — was suspended from the ceiling. But in a museum devoted to movie-making, the contributions of its Jewish founders, who created the studio system and the industry, were notably absent — until May 19, when “Hollywoodland: Jewish Founders and the Making of a Movie Capital” made its debut as the museum’s first permanent exhibition.

The occasion was marked by a weekend of special events, many featuring Jacqueline Stewart, the museum’s director and president, and associate curator Dara Jaffe.

When the museum opened last year, it met a flurry of criticism for leaving out the role that Jews played in the creation of Hollywood and the entertainment industry as we know it. Speaking to journalists to mark the opening, Stewart said that the critical responses to that omission helped shape the “Hollywoodland” exhibition and were part of the reason why the museum decided to make it a permanent part of the collection.

“I really feel that we’re able to present this exhibition now in a way that’s better than it would have been if we had tried to tell the story when we first opened because we understand our audiences better,” said Stewart. “[We are] listening to a broad range of voices and coming to understand that we really need to be the place to tell this industry’s history. And this industry’s history is a story about Jewish immigrants and the world that they built in Los Angeles.”

Stewart told the press, adding that “the lens of immigration is so relevant to so many people, that we’re hoping that that’s going to be something that makes people who have many different backgrounds feel a connection to this exhibition.”

Jaffe curated the exhibition with support from Gary Dauphin, former associate curator of digital presentations, and research assistant Josue L. Lopez. Film critic Neal Gabler, author of the 1988 book An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood — considered by many to be the definitive chronicle of the industry’s early days — was an adviser for the exhibition, and appeared in conversation with Jaffe during the opening weekend.

Jaffe told eJP that before creating the exhibition, the museum held listening sessions with people in Jewish communities in L.A. and around the country, and she “talked to every single person who reached out to me,” she said, including rabbis. “We wanted a lot of eyes on this. We didn’t want anyone to be surprised by the content. We wanted people to know exactly what to expect and to feel like their voices were heard.”

“Hollywoodland” tracks early Hollywood history, from the founding of the original eight major film studios — Universal, Fox (later 20th Century Fox), Paramount, United Artists, Warner Bros., Columbia, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and RKO — through the late 1920s.
An immersive map of Hollywood is paired with projections that show Hollywood's transition "from film frontier to industry town," including a timeline of where and when studios were developed.

Archival objects, like letters, memos and other communications from studio heads are featured. Jaffe told the press "because that's where you really get a sense of their voice, their personality."

One such artifact, a letter from Universal Pictures founder and first president, Carl Laemmle, to his cousin, director William Wyler — who would later win best director and best picture Oscars for "Mrs. Miniver" (1942), "The Best Years of Our Lives" (1946), and "Ben-Hur" (1959) — illustrates Laemmle's efforts to save Jewish Germans in the 1930s, aiming to bring them to America and give them jobs at the studio.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has been collecting film-related items since 1927, and its collection now includes more than 13 million photographs; 95,000 screenplays; 73,500 posters; 145,000 production and costume design drawings; 45,000 sound recordings; 8,000 props and other production items.

The exhibition also features a short original documentary — “From the Shtetl to the Studio: The Jewish Story of Hollywood,” narrated by Turner Classic Movies host Ben Mankiewicz — about the contributions of Hollywood's Jewish founders, in the context of their history and their rise to success.

"They transformed their own identities from humble peddlers to American monarchs. They turned early movies from technical novelty to entertainment art form, changing Los Angeles into Hollywood," Mankiewicz narrates, adding that their fear that they wouldn't be accepted as true Americans and their dream to assimilate and be accepted acted as "twin motivations [that] drove the creation of Hollywood."

While writing and producing the documentary, Jaffe told eJP that she wanted to hit a celebratory note so even if visitors only watch a segment of the 30-minute film, "they will grasp the most major ideas."

The permanence of this exhibition doesn't necessarily mean that the gallery's contents will remain exactly the same in perpetuity, but it "does mean that we're dedicated to telling the story," Jaffe told eJP.

"It will always be about that story. We will have the opportunity to refresh it. The only thing that's certain is that foundational story to the industry and the city we're a part of," she said. "The exhibition is a jumping-off point." The museum is also hosting additional programming this year that will be on-theme with the Hollywoodland exhibit.

Speaking to eJP, Jaffe described herself as a classical Hollywood cinemafangirl, with a passion for film analysis and a deep love for the Barbra Streisand classic "Funny Girl." After receiving her master's degree in film, she had learned that the Academy Museum was being created, and directed her job-seeking energy in that direction. Eleven years later, she has curated multiple exhibitions for the museum, including one about auteur Spike Lee and co-curated the currently featured exhibition on iconoclastic director John Waters.

Jaffe told eJP that she began researching the Hollywoodland exhibition in 2017, which was itself several years before the museum's opening.

"When [the museum] decided to create this exhibition, I jumped at the chance," she said, "between my expertise and my personal investment in this story, it felt right to take it on." She added that despite growing up as one of only a few Jews — or often, the only Jew — in her Texas hometown, she was "very proud" of her Jewish identity, and felt that as the minority, "I needed to be the loud proud voice."

In addition to being the museum's first permanent exhibition, "Hollywoodland" is only the second to be offered in both English and Spanish, which Stewart said was a step toward making the entire museum bilingual by 2028.

Jaffe told eJP that she hoped that everyone who encounters the museum "can see someone celebrated that they can relate to," and that one of the museum's goals is "telling complicated stories and challenging the dominant narratives of history... It's an opportunity to make a difference," she said.

"We are thinking about [Hollywoodland] as a very important educational platform to dispel these antisemitic harmful stereotypes, to offer some clarity and accuracy about why the founding of Hollywood is a Jewish immigrant story," Jaffe told the press.

The museum said the exhibition was funded by a number of donors: the Blavatnik Family Foundation, Margo and Irwin Winkler, A. Scott Berg and Kevin McCormick, Jeffrey Berg and Denny Luria, the Jules Brenner Trust, Bronni Stein Connolly, Dorchester Collection, William Fox Jr. Foundation, Adam and Abbe Aron, the Ronald L. Blanc Family, Barbara Roisman Cooper and Martin M. Cooper, the Mark Gordon Family, Hawk and Molly Koch and Family, Peter, Melissa and Emma Koss, Gail and Warren Lieberfarb in Memory of Ted Ashley, and Elaine Mae Woo.

Among the founding donors of the 300,000-square-foot museum, which opened in 2021, are Cheryl and Haim Saban, the David Geffen Foundation and others. The museum's accessibility initiatives, including ASL tours, assisted listening devices, physically accessible spaces and others were developed with counsel from The Ruderman Family Foundation, also a founding donor.

"The same kind of antisemitic rhetoric that was leveled at these original Jewish founders of Hollywood is still leveled at Jews in Hollywood today," Jaffe told eJP at a small press event. Antisemitic narratives, she added, twisted the Hollywood origin story into "conspiracy theories that continue the cycle of antisemitism that's been there from the very beginning of this industry."

"It's always the right time to tell this story," Jaffe said at the press meeting. "Unfortunately, antisemitism has always been prevalent and remains so, so this story always remains relevant. There have been so many times throughout the last couple years where I wished that this exhibition was open, so I could point to it and say if you'd like to be educated on this topic, please come to the museum."
Egypt’s delicate balancing act as a mediator in the Israel-Hamas war

Israel’s deputy attorney general for international law told the ICJ last week that some 50 cross-border tunnels exist between Gaza and Egypt; reports suggest Egypt torpedoed the recent cease-fire deal

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Since October, Egypt, a country that neighbors both Israel and the Gaza Strip, has vied to be among those helping to mediate an end to the hostilities sparked on Oct. 7 when Hamas infiltrated southern Israel.

Yet the most populous Arab state, which signed a peace treaty with Israel more than 40 years ago, seems to be playing a duplicitous game, with reports of dozens of Hamas tunnels snaking beneath its border with the Palestinian enclave, rocket launch sites found only meters from its territory and even officials undermining the cease-fire negotiations to pressure Israel into ending the war, analysts say.

“It’s all a balancing act for Egypt right now,” Joe Truzman, a senior research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told Jewish Insider.

“Egypt is in a difficult position and is nervous about what may come out of this conflict,” he continued. “On the one hand, it has a sizeable pro-Palestinian population, and does not want to see massive protests on the streets against the inaction of the Egyptian government; on the other, Egypt wants to maintain ties with Israel because it was instrumental in assisting the Egyptians in defeating the Islamic State in the northern Sinai and because Egypt’s relationship with Israel improves its standing with Washington.”

Truzman said the leadership in Cairo may also be worried about “what Israel will find in Rafah,” Gaza’s southernmost town, which runs along the Egypt border and the place where Hamas’ remaining battalions are said to be dug in among more than a million displaced civilians. Israel also believes that some 128 hostages, taken by Hamas terrorists during the Oct. 7 attack, are being held captive there.

“It could potentially be embarrassing for Egypt,” said Truzman. “I believe this is one of the big reasons why it has been so vocal against Israeli operations in the southern city.”

He said that as a mediator in past conflicts between Israel and Hamas, it was possible that Egypt offered some concessions to the Iranian-backed Islamist terror group that has ruled Gaza since 2007 – including the possibility of allowing it to keep or reestablish some of its cross-border tunnels.

In 2013, when current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ousted then-President Mohammed Morsi, a member and supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, the new government worked to destroy hundreds of cross-border tunnels built by Hamas. It also created a buffer zone – destroying homes and farms along the border – to combat transnational terror activity between terrorists in Sinai and Gaza.

“It’s possible Egypt missed some of the tunnels then, or that Hamas was able to reestablish its underground network to ferry weapons and possibly fighters,” Truzman observed. “Although it’s also possible that Egypt didn’t destroy all the tunnels because it wanted to gain some political leverage with Hamas.”

“It is also reasonable to assume that Israeli officials were aware that the improved ties between Egypt and Hamas could have led to efforts by Hamas to leverage it and build tunnels,” he added.

Last Friday, responding to a South African petition in the International Court of Justice in The Hague calling for Israel to immediately halt its ground assault in Rafah, Israel’s deputy attorney general for international law, Gilad Noam, described an intricate tunnel system built in Rafah – and estimated that some 50 passageways connected it to Egypt.

He said the subterranean network, which also includes operation centers and bunkers where some of the hostages are likely being kept, allows “Hamas to supply itself with weapons and ammunition.”

“[These tunnels] could potentially be used to smuggle hostages or senior Hamas operatives out of Gaza,” the deputy attorney general told the court. He also noted that “since the start of the present hostilities facilities, more than 1,400 rockets have been fired from Rafah, including more than 120 in the last two weeks.”

While the army has yet to comment formally on the discovery of cross-border tunnels between Gaza and Egypt, there have been reports of Israeli troops discovering rocket launch sites located only meters from the Egyptian border.

Khaled Hassan, an Egyptian-born political risk and intelligence analyst with over 13 years of experience working in the Middle East, told JI that it was unlikely the Egyptian government was aware of the tunnels or that it was “indifferent or complicit” in building them.

“It is important to remember that in December, the Israeli military discovered a large tunnel in Gaza with an entryway just a few hundred meters from its heavily guarded and fortified Erez crossing,” he noted, adding that widely accepted
conspiracy theories in the Arab world suggest that Israel and its highly capable intelligence community must have known about that, and other tunnels.

"This is the same argument we hear from Egypt's critics who are suggesting that Egypt must have known about those tunnels," Hassan said.

It was more likely, he continued, that the tunnels were built by Bedouin smugglers attempting to move products and individuals in and out of the Strip, a popular scheme since the start of Israel – and Egypt's – economic blockade of the territory following Hamas' takeover nearly two decades ago.

"If Israel, with all its advanced intelligence and military capabilities, did not detect tunnels close to its border with Gaza, then it is also likely that Egypt, with its comparatively limited capabilities, would have missed tunnels along its border with Gaza," Hassan emphasized.

However, a CNN report on Wednesday that an Egyptian intelligence official purposely changed the terms of a recent cease-fire proposal, already approved by Israel, in order to get Hamas to agree to it and further damage Israel's public image, might complicate the country's role as a mediator even further.

The news outlet said CIA Director Bill Burns, whom President Joe Biden charged with leading the cease-fire and hostage-release negotiations, "was angry and embarrassed" by sudden changes to the agreed-upon framework for the deal. The report quoted unnamed officials saying that the changes were instigated by a senior Egyptian intelligence official named Ahmed Abdel Khalek.

Hassan explained that Egypt's opposition to the Rafah operation stems from a combination of regional and domestic issues facing Sisi, but added that prolonging the war was creating an "increasingly dangerous" situation.

"This could be the most critical stage of the war since Oct. 7," he said. "The CNN report erodes Israeli and American trust in Egypt as a reliable mediator and diminishes the possibility of renewed negotiations."