

JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY



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Welcome to The Tell, the week's Jewish news from Washington
by **Ron Kampeas**, JTA's Washington Bureau Chief.
**Pro-Israel, Post-Election: Checking Partisanship
at the Door**

A month or so after an election where everyone played rough, including on the Jewish field — Republicans and Democrats exchanged allegations of anti-Semitism — Jewish Democrats and Republicans met in the Capitol to discuss getting along, at least when it comes to Israel.

The setting was a conference convened by the American Zionist Movement. The umbrella group brings together around 30 groups that span the Zionist spectrum.

Rep. Lee Zeldin, a Long Island Republican who beat Perry Gershon in hard-fought race between Jewish candidates (Zeldin battered Gershon for accepting an endorsement from J Street; Gershon said he saw parallels between the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s and the rise of Donald Trump), was all about building bipartisan support for Israel. He praised pro-Israel Democrats present, like Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., who will chair the House Foreign Relations committee in the incoming Congress. “Eliot Engel is right,” said Zeldin, who spoke after Engel did. “Bipartisanship is critical to standing with Israel.” (Zeldin also revealed that he and Engel are distantly related.)

Democrats were similarly conciliatory. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., acknowledged that Jewish Democrats and Republicans tend to use Israel as a cudgel. “We need you to have a watchful eye and admonish those of us who take it too far,” she told the assembled group leaders.

Speakers for both sides tended to use the flaws of the other side to illustrate their point: Zeldin dinged the Obama administration for waffling over its position on Jerusalem. Halie Soifer, the director of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, decried what she said was the partisan rhetoric of Trump’s ambassador to Israel, David Friedman.

The Republican Jewish Coalition’s congressional affairs director, Noah Silverman, was an exception, laying out in a thoughtful presentation the flaws of each side. He worried his party was developing “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez derangement syndrome,” hyperfocusing on the 29-year-old New York Democratic congresswoman-elect and her alleged missteps.

Ocasio-Cortez could one day be an ally, he said, despite having accused Israel of a “massacre” of Gazan Palestinians attempting to breach the border with Israel. “Our today adversary might be our friend tomorrow,” he said. “We need to avoid painting with a broad brush.”

He urged Democrats to acknowledge the erosion of support for Israel in the party’s ranks, which has shown up in recent polling, and which he said could be accelerated by Democrats’ reflexive rejection of everything Trump does, including moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

“Don’t let your frustrations with the president take you away from strong pro-Israel positions you have taken in the past,” he said.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., the minority leader, spoke of shmoozing Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who is holding up an Israel defense assistance bill, while they pedaled stationary bikes at the Senate gym.

“I lobbied him today,” Schumer said, adding that he sensed that he made headway. (Schumer said he likes to work out early in the morning, in part because that’s when Republicans show up and he can make deals; Democrats, he said, tend to work out in the afternoon.)

Schumer said there was fault on both sides in weaponizing Israel. “Friends of Israel do not look for outliers on either party and make this a wedge issue,” he said.

Message in a Mezuzah

A new Congress means veteran members get cushier offices, and freshmen get the scraps.

Zeldin is moving on up, and the first-term lawmaker taking his office in the Longworth building is Ilhan Omar, the Minnesota Democrat who is one of the two first Muslim women elected to Congress. (The other is Rashida Tlaib, also a Democrat, from Michigan.)

Zeldin said he was “tempted to leave my mezuzahs” behind — although he didn’t explain why. On one hand, Omar and Tlaib are the first members of Congress to openly embrace the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel. On the other, Omar has pleased Orthodox Jewish groups in her bid to allow members to wear head covering in Congress (she wears a headscarf).

More seriously, Zeldin said he would welcome a frank exchange with Omar about the need to support Israel.

The question is whether Tlaib and Omar are ready for outreach. Tlaib has made a show of saying that she will not join the traditional trip to Israel for freshmen organized by the American Israel Educational Foundation, an affiliate of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. She said she would organize her own trip to the West Bank.

Tlaib and Omar tend to cast pro-Israel advocates as intimidating bogeymen, a posture that often inhibits engagement. On Dec. 8 she tweeted without evidence that her “mere existence made me a target” of AIPAC.

Omar told the Pod Save America podcast that she backs BDS as a means of opening up the conversation on Israel. “Oftentimes when we are having a discussion about this region... one way, one side of the conversation is allowed,” she said.

Wasserman Schultz told the AZM conference that most Jews will continue to vote Democratic because candidates on both sides are seen as good on Israel. “Domestic issues will be the driver of Jewish voters when it comes to who they support in the 2020 elections,” she said.

If Tlaib and Omar’s views become more widespread, that prediction could be upended.

Once Again the Answer to Pittsburgh Is... Fighting BDS?

Another thing Zeldin and Engel have in common (aside from Zeldin’s great aunt, who is Engel’s mother’s first cousin) is the same answer to how to cope with the massacre in Pittsburgh, where a gunman murdered 11 worshippers in a synagogue complex on Oct. 27, the worst Semitic attack in U.S. history.

Both men described pro-Israel activism as the proper response to Pittsburgh. A similar tone was struck at the Israeli American Council's annual conference held this year in Hollywood, Florida.

It's the same approach that was suggested by Naftali Bennett, Israel's Diaspora minister, in Pittsburgh the day after the massacre. ([The Forward's Batya Ungar Sargon puts the fire to Bennett's feet on the Pittsburgh-BDS conflation in an interview this week.](#)) The gunman who raided The Tree of Life synagogue complex was fueled by rage at Jews generally and at migrants from Latin America, whom he linked to Jews because of the immigration advocacy of HIAS. Israel didn't factor.

So why Israel? It could be that the return of robust, right-wing anti-Semitism caught some of the most prominent and influential American Jews off guard. Engel remarked how Joe Lieberman's 2000 run for vice president was notable for the lack of anti-Semitism it inspired. Zeldin noted that "from kindergarten to leaving active duty in the army" he hadn't experienced a single anti-Semitic encounter.

Fighting for Israel has been the focus and priority of Jewish advocates and activists for years. The community might need to develop other tools.

Last Minute Push for a BDS Bill

One of the agenda items for the AZM was legislation that would penalize companies that comply with BDS, which they would like to see passed in the final weeks of Congress. The American Civil Liberties Union and other free speech advocates oppose the legislation because they say it impinges on speech, but also because the Senate version extends the penalties to companies that boycott only West Bank settlements. The House version does not — it exempts settlement boycotts — and insiders tell me the House version is the one favored to pass.

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