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Raritan Valley's Jewish Community Forum Presents 'A Jewish Agenda for New Jersey'

- [By Harry Glazer](#)
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Moshe Kinderlehrer speaks at the event.

As all the excitement fades and the dust settles after the recent gubernatorial election, Jewish communal organizations are taking stock of the new landscape in Trenton and assessing how to fine-tune their advocacy for communal priorities.

On Saturday night, November 8, the The Jewish Community Forum of Raritan Valley held a panel discussion of communal leaders to take a closer look at “A Jewish Agenda for New Jersey” in the new year. The panel discussion featured Dr. Brad Cohen, mayor of East Brunswick; Katie Katz, executive director of TeachNJ; Dan Rozett, director of community relations of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ; Shlomo Schorr, New Jersey director of legislative affairs, Agudath Israel. The panel discussion was moderated by Moshe Kinderlehrer, publisher of The Jewish Link.



Mayor Brad Cohen

The program was held at Congregation Ahavas Achim in Highland Park and was co-sponsored by The Jewish Link, TeachNJ and the Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ.

Event chair Josh Caplan of Edison welcomed all the attendees, thanked community members who helped plan the program and formally introduced the community leaders on the panel and the moderator.



Dan Rozett

Starting the discussion, Kinderlehrer noted the phenomenon that he calls the “Havdala pizza effect,” in which community members get “fired up” over Shabbos on a communal issue and vow to take action, yet after they say havdala their conviction to act dissipates and instead they order pizza. He commended the communal leaders for staying involved and the dozens of attendees present for coming out to learn more.

Kinderlehrer asked the attendees to offer comments on the recent election and to share their views of the top two Jewish communal priorities going forward. Cohen spoke about the media’s “preoccupation with polls,” while the vast majority of citizens don’t want to be bothered with answering polling calls. He suggested that the two top priorities are security in shuls and homes and tackling anti-Israel/antisemitic bias in education in public schools and on college campuses.



Katie Katz

Katz talked about the larger-than-expected victory by Mikie Sherrill and the supposed “lack of enthusiasm” she had in the polling versus the reality of the turnout. She identified security concerns, Jewish education/school choice and the need for more funding as the top communal concerns.

Rozett noted the unexpected high voter turnout in the election and pointed to three high-priority issues for the Jewish Federation—passing the IHRA legislation: addressing school curricula or events with troubling attitudes on Jews or Israel; and state budget-funding priorities, such as the nonprofit security grant program.



Shlomo Schorr

Schorr remarked that he was “surprised that people were surprised” by the results of the election and drew attention to Democratic Party gains in the New Jersey Assembly. He echoed the priorities identified by the other speakers and added that his organization is working to protect Jewish individuals’ and local Jewish communities’ religious rights in different towns in the state.

Kinderlehrer asked Katz and Schorr to comment on efforts to increase Jewish voter turnout. Katz noted that in the 2023 election Jewish communities voted at twice the rate of the general population; Teach NJ is working to increase those rates. She knows from personal conversations that elected officials are aware of the high voter turnout in our communities. Schorr commented that often, “it’s the lower-level elected officials who can have the

highest effect on your life,” and urged people to learn about the candidates and vote in the races at the bottom of the ballot.



A view of the crowd.

Cohen commented that studies have shown that people completing mail-in ballots fill out more sections of the ballot. He added that while other ethnic and racial groups often invite him to their communities' events, the Jewish community doesn't always do this and should do a better job.

Kinderlehrer asked Cohen to share some of the challenges he has faced over the past two years as mayor. Cohen related that “it is very difficult to sit on the stage and hear a group of people calling for a cease-fire resolution at every council meeting.” The group's advocacy later “morphed” into making calls to cancel East Brunswick's Sister-City relationship with Yavneh. Cohen took the approach that when approached by Muslim community members, he would happily discuss their community's security needs but not engage in discussions about the Israeli/Hamas conflict, over which East Brunswick has no jurisdiction.

Kinderlehrer asked Rozett to address the chances for passage of the IHRA bill, and Rozett spoke about the claims by Muslim community leaders that it infringes on free-speech rights, which is expressly protected in the bill. He said the bill has passed committees in the New Jersey Senate and Assembly, and the Jewish Federation is currently working to persuade the two houses of New Jersey government to pass the bill.



(l-r) Josh Caplan, event chair; Moshe Kinderlehrer, moderator; and Susan Antman, executive director of The Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey.

Rozett asked Matthew Dikovics, managing partner of Nassau Government Relations, which works in Trenton on behalf of the Jewish Federations in New Jersey, to comment on this topic. Dikovics echoed Rozett's comments that the bill does not infringe on free-speech rights or on academic inquiry and suggested that the "bottlenecks" facing the bill are the leaders of the senate and assembly. He suggested that Jewish community members direct their advocacy towards the offices of these leaders.

Kinderlehrer asked Katz to comment on the potential for New Jersey to opt in to the Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA), which was part of the "One Big Beautiful Bill" passed on the federal level. Katz stated that the ECCA "has the potential to have a tremendous impact on our communities" and explained that it allows for up to a \$1700 tax credit for families who make donations to school scholarship granting organizations. The governor of each state has to opt in to the program by approving a list of scholarship-granting organizations. One state, Nebraska, has opted in so far, and Teach NJ expects a "domino effect" once the rules for the ECCA program are formalized on the federal level. Schorr added that his organization is already in talks with Mikie Sherrill's staff on this issue.

Other topics addressed included how elected officials can speak out against extremist voices and the importance of getting involved, and sending emails to state officials on issues of concern. Schorr shared a story of a meeting he had with a member of Congress, who told him: "I'm with you on Israel, but my staff isn't and often asks why I support Israel. You must engage with them more." Schorr suggested that community members do more

outreach to the staff of state and federal legislators. Cohen added that these 'low level' aides often pursue a career in politics and will later become the more senior aides and may run for office themselves.

Wrapping up the program, Caplan encouraged attendees to participate in the NORPAC Mission to Washington, DC, in the spring and invited people to attend the next Jewish Community Forum event on December 13, featuring Anne Bayefsky, the director of the Touro College Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, who also leads the Eye on the United Nations organization.

Speaking after the program, Liz Katz of Edison stated that she attended because "it's very important to know what's going on from leaders on these issues, and very critical to get involved." Her son Rafi Katz of Highland Park, who attended with his son Corey, commented, "The topics covered were extremely important to the Jewish community. I found it interesting to learn what is being done on the legislative and advocacy levels, and to learn how we can support these advocacy efforts."

Faigie Cornick of East Brunswick stated, "The main takeaway that I left with from this panel discussion is that we can't be complacent about letting elected officials know how we stand on issues that affect our community. Even when we have reason to believe that a politician is on our side, our vocal and persistent opponents will often find ways to sway them if we don't take the time, individually and repeatedly, to make our stances very clear through grassroots advocacy."

Rabbi Noah Whittenburg of Highland Park, assistant rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Achim, commented, "I was really struck by hearing all the panelists speak about the importance every single voter has, even if they voted for what was ultimately the losing side. The power in voting seems to be in the dedication it displays and not only in the outcome it creates."