

'Most U.S. Jews Don't Want to Choose: They Can Stand With Israel, and Stand With Palestinians'

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, the spiritual leader of the world's largest LGBTQ synagogue, and her partner, union leader Randi Weingarten, are paying a 'shiva visit' to Israel, while dealing with U.S progressive voices who 'believe that Israel kind of deserved what it got' on Oct. 7

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Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum has traditionally had few qualms about being a member of a minority – as a lesbian rabbi, it is practically her brand. But in the days and weeks following the start of [the Israel-Hamas war](#), she says it has been her identity as a liberal Zionist that has made her feel like a member of a minority.

[Kleinbaum](#) is the spiritual leader of New York's Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the world's largest LGBTQ synagogue. The space she and wife Randi Weingarten have long occupied – as high-profile American-Jewish leaders who are deeply connected to Israel, but also outspoken advocates for Palestinian rights and

opponents of the occupation – is not a comfortable place to be right now.

Even within the pioneering congregation Kleinbaum has led for more than 30 years, she says the atmosphere is tense and full of “tremendous anxiety,” as the war continues with no clear resolution in sight.

“We’re in tough times, there’s no question about it,” she says, sitting in the lobby of a Tel Aviv hotel beside Weingarten, who is president of the American Federation of Teachers.

“You know, the LGBT world is so focused on non-binary thinking. We’ve rejected the binary about sexuality, we’ve rejected the binary about gender identity,” Kleinbaum notes. “And yet at the same time, so many in this world have adopted a very binary approach to Israel-Palestine issues.”

Her community, she adds, is not at all immune from the expectations of conflict in American culture, in which “the good guys are always weak and the bad guys are strong. And people want a two-hour Hollywood movie in which at the end of it, the good guys overcome and vanquish the bad guys, the lights go up and you walk outside. The message I keep bringing to the congregation is that life is not a Hollywood movie.”

She tries at every opportunity, she says, to explain to those on both extremes that simple solutions are not available, and “there is not a good guy or a bad guy; there is not one victim and one perpetrator.”

That message is not always welcome. In far-left progressive circles, there are those who “believe that Israel kind of deserved what it got” on October 7 and “what Hamas did was an act of justified violence.” The fact that she “completely rejects and

totally condemns” such views has made some “very angry” with her, Kleinbaum says.

At the same time, she says others are upset with her “because I continue to insist on the full equality of the Palestinian people, and I continue to stand against the occupation. I will continue to stand by the truth that I’ve said forever and is not new: Israel cannot oppress people.”

Union head Weingarten says she often finds herself in a similar position. “On the same day, I will be criticized by someone from AIPAC for being a Palestinian lover, and criticized by somebody from one of our local union branches that I have not spoken out strongly enough against Israel.”

She has been slammed in union circles for standing up for Israel’s right to defend itself, including during a AFL-CIO meeting that The New York Times described as a “raw” debate among top union officials on the Israel-Hamas conflict. She was accused by the far left of “green-lighting Zionist war crimes.”

Absorbing the energy

Kleinbaum and Weingarten spoke to Haaretz on the second day of a Thanksgiving week trip to Israel, following breakfast with members of what they call their “Israeli family”: Israelis who were members of Kleinbaum’s synagogue during stints in New York, former congregants who made aliyah and other friends.

The couple note that during their last visit, in April, their friends were wearing pro-democracy T-shirts protesting the proposed judicial overhaul. Now these same people wear T-shirts with photographs of hostages on them. Like so many other Israelis, their friends have suffered losses, and some had stopped by on

their way to or from 30-day memorials of loved ones killed on October 7.

“We’re so horrified and condemn what Hamas did in the strongest and most horrific terms, and we feel like we’re making a shiva visit to the whole country,” Kleinbaum says.

Their Thanksgiving pilgrimage was not only to offer condolences, though. Their schedule was packed with stops at the coexistence organizations they often visit and to which Kleinbaum regularly takes synagogue members – including Hand in Hand (Israel’s largest network of Jewish-Arab schools) and the Standing Together Jewish-Arab nonprofit. They also visited Weingarten’s union compatriots at the Histadrut labor federation and had an emotional meeting with the families of Israeli hostages being held in Gaza.

Both women felt they needed to be in Israel now, Kleinbaum says, “to absorb the energy here and really listen to the perspective of people who are here and to ... pay our shiva call after the biggest pogrom that has happened to the Jewish people since the Holocaust – and, just as importantly, also listen to Palestinian voices inside of Israel, and to listen to the voices that are fighting for shared society.” They intend to take those views back to New York.

“We have to keep telling the deep truths that those of us who are progressive Zionists understand: that there is no future except a shared future. And we have to keep reinforcing the message that this is the land with two peoples, two very complicated peoples, and that we continue to hope for a future in which both peoples can live with justice and peace and security,” Kleinbaum says.

She admits she doesn't know where events will lead, but right now it "feels like we're at an inflection point not only for the State of Israel, for Palestinians and Israeli Jews, but for the Jewish people. It feels like we're at a very significant moment of Jewish history, including for Diaspora Jewish life."

The Biden factor

Cultivating any sympathy for Israel's position in U.S. progressive and liberal circles these days, notes Weingarten, can be a considerable challenge given the country's leadership. "The fact that [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) has been the face of Israel over the course of the last year has been highly problematic to the progressive forces in the United States," she says.

Add to the mix the unabashedly racist, extremist views of members of his government, including National Security Minister [Itamar Ben-Gvir](#) and Finance Minister [Bezalel Smotrich](#), and the challenge is exponentially greater.

Having such extreme figures in such prominent positions, Weingarten says, "has clouded and obscured the basic humanity and the massacre that happened by Hamas on October 7, and obscured it in a way that is, personally, very painful to me and so many others."

There is, she adds, a chance to get through to Democrats old enough to have "understood and supported the reasons for Israel becoming a state not just in the shadow of the Holocaust, but because of long-standing reasons for the Jewish people having a state and who reveled in the democracy that was promised in the 1948 declaration" – the most prominent and powerful of whom is President Joe Biden.

Both Weingarten and Kleinbaum have relationships with the Biden White House. Weingarten is a longtime active member of the Democratic National Committee, and her name was floated for a time in 2020 as a possible Biden candidate for secretary of education. In 2021, he appointed Kleinbaum to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Dealing with younger liberals and progressives who “have a very different perception of Israel” is another matter, though.

Weingarten says “polls bear out that the Democratic Party is still supportive of Joe Biden’s approach to Israel and Gaza,” but there is still considerable pressure from those harshly critical of the amount of force used by the Israel Defense Forces, mounting calls for a unilateral cease-fire, along with a faction that does, in fact, challenge Israel’s right to exist.

Much of this, she believes, is a direct result of the images coming out of Gaza, and Israel’s decision not to widely circulate images of the horrors of October 7 in real time. Because of that decision, “the trauma, the massacre and the pogrom is just not well known and not understood in the same way as what happened to the [Gazan] hospitals” and the “sheer amount of death” in Gaza.

But it is also clear, Kleinbaum interjects, that “the right-wing voices absolutely undermine Biden’s ability to support Israel.”

The deliberate disinformation and misinformation, and the “many so-called news sources that are not tethered to the truth” amplified across social media,” Weingarten continues, has resulted in “an utter lack of understanding about this crisis” by many Americans, especially the young.

While Biden’s unrelenting support for Israel in its battle with Hamas, despite pressure from his party’s progressive wing, may

be welcome, she has cautioned her American friends, it should not be misunderstood.

Biden is “a staunch ally of Israeli democracy and also supports Palestinians: he doesn’t support Israel to the detriment of the Palestinians, even though people accuse him of that. And if the Israeli right really doesn’t understand this, then they are really threatening the future of President Biden’s support. Because he cares deeply about Palestine; he cares about both people. That’s why he has said over and over again that there has to be a two-state solution,” Weingarten says.

And despite the fact that “extreme voices are the loudest right now and people are looking for simple solutions,” there are more people that share common ground with the president – particularly in America’s Jewish community.

“I believe that the majority of American Jews are actually looking for this vision,” Weingarten says. “They want to hear that they can stand with Israel, and stand with the rights of Palestinians. They don’t have to choose. And yes, today it’s a very narrow place to be. But I reject the binary that forces a simple choice. And even though it’s not an easy place to be, I believe if we keep standing in this place and pushing the message out there, more and more people will join us.”

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