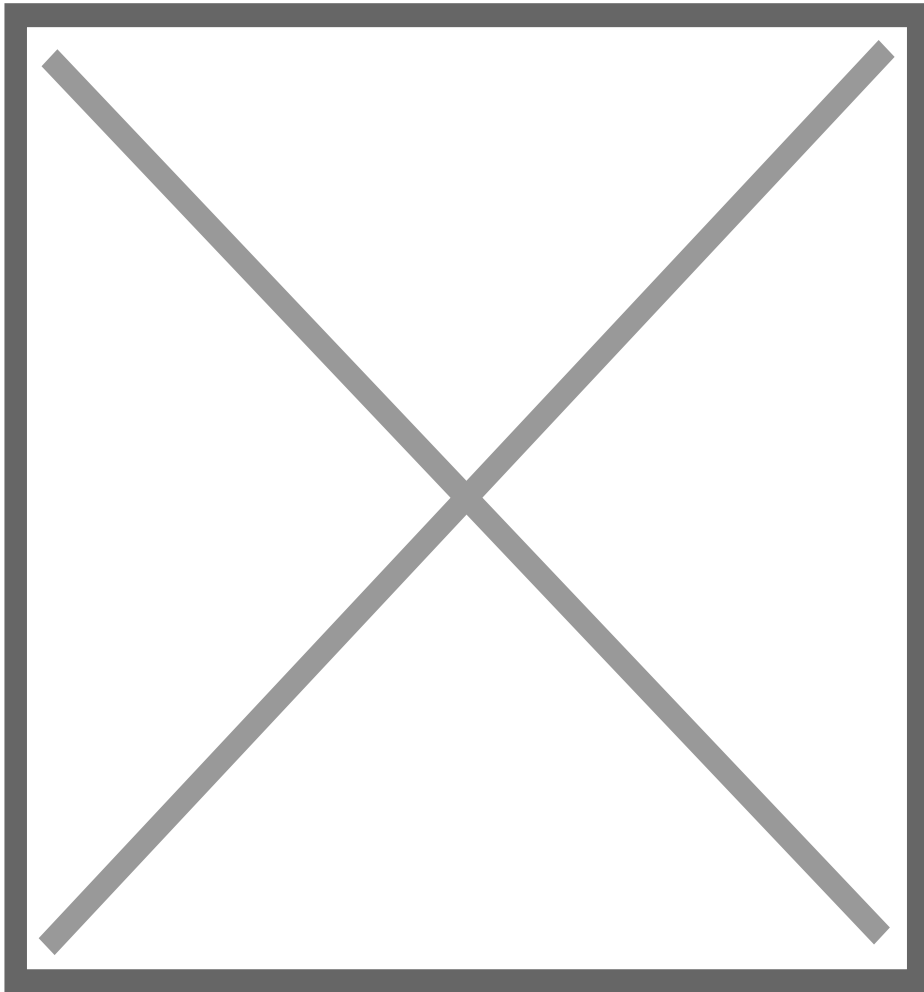


Why rabbis across the US are taking sides in New York's mayoral race

by [Benjamin Cohen](#)

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(Instagram)

Rabbi Danny Schiff had a rule: no national letters.

The community scholar of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh avoided open statements about far-off politics. But this month, he broke that rule—for a mayor’s race nearly 400 miles away.

“I never, ever, ever sign on to national rabbinic letters,” Schiff said. “And I made a lifetime exception for this particular instance.”

That exception was [Zohran Mamdani](#)—a New York state assemblyman, outspoken critic of Israel and, according to polls, the frontrunner to become the city’s first Muslim mayor. Schiff joined [more than a thousand rabbis](#) who signed an [open letter opposing Mamdani](#), arguing that he “gives oxygen to anti-Zionist voices” and represents “a threatening reality for the American Jewish future.”

Schiff, who splits his time between Pittsburgh and Israel, said Mamdani's campaign risks normalizing a "playbook" that other politicians might follow.

But not all rabbis saw danger in Mamdani's rise. From Oregon to California to Illinois, other clergy have spoken out in support of him—or at least in defense of his right to run without being cast as a threat. The unusual spectacle of rabbis across the country weighing in on a New York City election has revealed deep fault lines over Israel, antisemitism, and what Jewish leadership looks like in 2025.

The question animating the debate is less who should be mayor of New York than what it means, right now, to speak as a rabbi in public life.

A new open letter published Tuesday, titled [Jews for a Shared Future](#), gathered more than 900 signatures from rabbis, cantors, rabbinical students, and Jewish leaders who reject efforts to frame Mamdani's candidacy as a threat.

"As antisemitism and Islamophobia both rise in America, we understand that our fates are bound together," the letter reads. "Jewish safety cannot be built on Muslim vulnerability, nor can we combat hate against our community while turning away from hate against our neighbors. Our traditions teach us that justice is indivisible—we are only truly safe when we ensure the safety and dignity of all. This is not merely strategic; it is sacred."

The letter's point person, Shoshana Leis, co-rabbi with her husband of Pleasantville Community Synagogue in Westchester County, New York, said she wrote it after seeing how the national conversation about Mamdani had hardened into mutual accusation.

"I felt there needed to be a response," she said. "I didn't want to endorse any candidate, but I wanted to give an alternative perspective—the way we're going to live safely is to engage across differences and choose our shared future."

Leis called New York "our pluralistic, treasured city," and said Jewish safety "is fully interdependent on the safety of everyone in New York City." Her letter, she added, was meant to be "a letter against divisiveness."

Mamdani's [positions on Israel](#) have roiled New York's Jewish community—the largest in the United States—as he has faced scrutiny for [refusing to outright condemn](#) the slogan "globalize the intifada," calling the Gaza war a genocide, and pledging to [arrest](#) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if he visits the city.

In Manhattan, two of the city's most prominent rabbis [took sharply different approaches](#) to the campaign. Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue openly urged congregants to back Andrew Cuomo, calling Mamdani a threat to Jewish security. Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue reaffirmed her congregation's stance against political endorsements.

Adding to the moment, a July ruling by the Internal Revenue Service said that [clergy can now endorse political candidates](#) without automatically jeopardizing their congregations' tax-exempt status, a change that has effectively loosened decades-old restraints on rabbinic speech from the pulpit.

The divergent choices of Buchdahl and Cosgrove captured a new era in which rabbis, once shielded from electoral politics, now face pressure to take public stands in the age of livestreamed sermons and viral petitions.

From Los Angeles, David Wolpe, rabbi emeritus of Sinai Temple, said the anxiety is less about New York policy than precedent. "It's New York—and whatever happens in New York is, by definition, national news," he

said. “People worry that a mayor of a major city with Mamdani’s views creates both a permission structure and an incentive for others to follow.”

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, who writes the newsletter [Life Is a Sacred Text](#) from Chicago, said the controversy reflects deeper communal and generational shifts. “Mamdani has become the lightning rod for Jewish communal tensions,” she said. “All of our intra-communal *tsuris*—everything that had begun to boil over since October 7—needs a new place to manifest, and this is where it’s going.”

She said the uproar is less about New York than about Jewish anxiety. “People’s fears about ‘antisemitism on the left’ find prominent articulation here, while a whole world of antisemitism on the right is being left unaddressed,” she said.

“There has been a sea change in how an entire generation engages with Israel,” she continued. “Mamdani’s popularity with younger Jews is reflective of that. It’s easier to blame him than to grapple with how the conversation around Israel has changed nationally and globally.”

Ruttenberg added that if she lived in New York, she would endorse him. “He has said repeatedly that he’s going to [increase hate crime funding by 800 percent](#) in New York, a city that he is meant to serve. His priority is not foreign policy.

“He’s become symbolic of all of these fears that people have about so many other things that are not his to hold,” she said.

From Eugene, Oregon, Ruhi Sophia Motzkin Rubenstein rabbi of Temple Beth Israel—a Reconstructionist congregation of about 400 households—signed the Shared Future letter.

“It’s absolutely absurd that I’m weighing in on a New York City election,” she said. “But I do have a stake in how Jews and rabbis are publicly portrayed on a national scale.”

“I do think there is a manufactured panic that is very dangerous,” she added. “This is not the greatest threat to the Jewish people. This is a dangerous red herring.”

Not every rabbi fits neatly into one camp. Suzanne Singer, rabbi emerita of Temple Beth El in Riverside, California, signed both letters—the one opposing Mamdani and the one urging solidarity.

“I hesitated before signing the first letter because I didn’t particularly want to attack one person,” she said. “I don’t think Mamdani is an antisemite. He’s an anti-Zionist, and there are plenty of Jews who are anti-Zionist. That doesn’t make him an outlier.”

Singer said she worries about rhetoric that casts Israelis as “settler colonialists,” and believes Israel and the Palestinians both have the right to self-determination. But she was also drawn to the second letter’s message. “We have to find a way to work together and live together,” she said. “Antisemitism is enough—we don’t need rabbis fighting rabbis.”

She expects some overlap between signatories of both letters. “The first letter, I wish it hadn’t targeted Mamdani so directly,” she said. “Everything has gotten to be black and white—there’s no nuance, no complicated narrative anymore.”

For Schiff, the Pittsburgh rabbi who broke his lifetime rule, the issue is existential. “Clearly Mamdani has made it his business to let everybody know what his views are on Israel—in the largest Jewish city in America,” he said. “Other politicians around the country might take note.”

“The end of the kinetic war has not brought an end to the war of delegitimization against Israel,” Schiff added. “If you can’t beat Israel militarily, then the anti-Zionism campaign becomes the favored route for aggression.”

Ruttenberg said she sees something different in that lightning. “If we think that magically defeating Mamdani will somehow return us to the way things used to be,” she said, “that is not what is going to be the outcome.”

She also questioned the moral calculus behind the opposition’s preferred candidate. “If we want to talk about Torah values,” she said, “Cuomo is a [serial sexual abuser](#) who spent [\\$20 million of taxpayer money](#) paying for his defense. In what way do my colleagues think this is any representation of either pragmatic or ethical values?”

Her conclusion was blunt, and hopeful. “When we make choices out of fear, it tends to end badly,” she said. “And when we choose based on building relationships and solidarity—understanding that our liberation is bound up with everyone else’s—that’s how we win, as Jews and as people.” —The Forward

[Jacob Kornbluh](#) contributed to this article. This story was originally published in [the Forward](#). [Click here](#) to get the Forward's free email newsletters delivered to your inbox.