

At a Manhattan synagogue, ‘normie’ pro-Israel liberals stage a last stand

ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL MAY 5, 2024



From left: Larry Cohler-Esses, Nancy Kaufman, Nomi Colton-Max, Ruth Messinger and Arielle Angel take part in a panel on Israel and progressivism at Anshe Chesed in Manhattan, May 2, 2024. (JTA photo)

([JTA](#)) — Although once deployed by the alt-right as a disparaging term for the unenlightened, “normie” has come to suggest a sort of consensual political everyperson.

Josh Marshall of Talking Points Memo, for example, has called Joe Biden the “apotheosis of Normie-dom” — that is, a “median Democrat” who is “pretty much where the center of gravity of his party is.” [Pollster Natalie Jackson](#) describes “normie” conservatives as classic Reagan Republicans who don’t buy into Donald Trump’s election denial.

It’s the rare political movement that doesn’t consider itself or aspire to be the norm. But “normie” has come to mean a moderate member of a party or movement that is being yanked hard to the left or right.

On Thursday, a panel discussion on Israel held in the heart of Manhattan's liberal Jewish Upper West Side had what Marshall calls "big normie energy." And by the time it ended with a rebuke by the youngest panelist, you could almost sense that a generation that once defined mainstream Jewish liberalism was getting a glimpse of a future without them.

"What's Left for Progressive Jews" was sponsored by Minyan M'at, a lay-led egalitarian congregation that tends to attract Jewish communal Brahmins: academics, journalists, Jewish professionals, rabbis without pulpits.

The speakers included three women on the pro-Israel left: Nancy Kaufman, former CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women and current board chair of the New York Jewish Agenda; Nomi Colton-Max, executive board chair of Ameinu, the progressive Zionist movement; and Ruth Messinger, the former Manhattan borough president and former CEO of American Jewish World Service.

All three had done time in the trenches when liberal, pro-peace Zionists were considered suspect by parts of the Jewish mainstream, and to this day they remain to the left of the majority of Israelis.

But the ground has shifted since Oct. 7. The pro-Palestinian demonstrators tend to reject Zionists of all stripes. That leaves pro-Israel progressives in a lonely place: deeply critical of Israel's right-wing government, but also appalled by a protest movement that challenges the very legitimacy of Israel, and hesitant to join a Jewish right that wants to clamp down on free speech and attack higher education.

"I think most of the progressive Jewish world we are talking about probably fits somewhere in the middle of these extremes," said Colton-Max. "As a parent of college kids, what terrifies me is that there is no safe space for them at all."

When the panel's moderator, the longtime Jewish journalist Larry Cohler-Esses, asked for their reactions to the student protests —

including the upheavals at Columbia University just a few blocks away — Kaufman invoked her own activist bona fides.

“I’m a child of the ’60s. I went to college in those wonderful years between 1968 and 1972,” she said. “I took over buildings and protested against ROTC and we closed down Brandeis University in 1970. So I believe in protests. In those days we felt we had a righteous cause, which was the Vietnam War. But we weren’t protesting *people*. So I think we need to dig into this deeper and I would say that anti-Zionism doesn’t equal antisemitism except when it does.”

Kaufman’s group, New York Jewish Agenda, has been trying hard since Oct. 7 to articulate the normie progressive Zionist position on Israel: the return of the hostages, an end to the fighting, humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza and, after the war, a push for shared society and a two-state solution. “We need to support democratic Israel and support our friends and families in Israel, the majority of which are asking for elections and asking for new leadership,” Kaufman said at Thursday’s event. “And I think the sooner the better.”

That last line earned strong applause from an audience of people who appeared to have largely come of age, like Kaufman, in the 1960s and ’70s. (Messinger is 83; Colton-Max is 56.)

That made the fourth panelist, Arielle Angel, an outlier in more ways than one. She is a millennial, and she is editor in chief of Jewish Currents. The recently revived leftist magazine is deeply critical of Israel and Zionism and strongly supportive of the student protests. A recent article disparaged normie pro-Israel Democratic moderates who think replacing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will bring an end to “Israel’s ongoing genocidal assault on Gaza.”

Many in the crowd murmured uncomfortably when Angel defended the protesters and criticized the police who have been breaking up their encampments. “I just want to say that only one side is promoting state violence,” she said. “Only one side is bringing the whole weight of the NYPD and the administration down on them.”

Angel also suggested that most of the protesters do not consider the slogan “from the river to the sea” a call for genocide of the Israelis, as many Jewish groups insist, but a plea for justice for Palestinians living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, whatever form a resolution takes.

The older activists on the panel seemed reluctant to challenge Angel directly, although there was a heated discussion about “single-issue voters” and fears that young people sympathetic to the Palestinian cause will sit out the next election and hand the presidency to Trump. “Your job,” Messinger, a former New York City mayoral candidate, told the audience, “is to find 10 people the age of your grandchildren and figure out what you need to do, short of cash bribery, to convince them to vote” for Biden.

On this, too, Angel pushed back against the normie liberal consensus that young people should vote for Biden despite their anger over his literal embrace of Netanyahu after Oct. 7. She noted how the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, representing the pro-Israel mainstream, has consistently alienated young voters by opposing progressive candidates who don’t toe their line on Israel. “Young people see what’s going on,” she said. “They don’t see a lot of change, and they don’t feel like Biden actually cares about the things that they care about now. I think people should vote, but I do think there’s a limit to how many times you can use this argument to ‘vote for the lesser evil.’”

Cohler-Esses, hoping to end the evening on a positive note, asked the panelists to describe concrete actions the audience might take to support a progressive pro-Israel agenda.

Kaufman and Colton-Max spoke of organizations working on shared society in Israel, interfaith coalitions in the United States and various protests to free the hostages and support democracy in Israel.

Messinger urged the audience to vote, and even to make their second homes in upstate New York their primary residences so they can vote in swing districts come November.

Angel ended by challenging one of the origin stories of the '60s generation, noting that only a minority of Jews marched for civil rights, and that “75% of the community thought they were nuts.” And she suggested that concerns that the normie left was “betrayed” by other progressives after Oct. 7 were misplaced.

“Instead of thinking about what other people can do for you,” she said, “start thinking about how you are showing up in a real concrete way for other people in your community.”

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