

Bagels and Leadership

JCRC-NY congressional breakfast attracts local and national activists

By DANIEL PEREZ

While many of us were still in bed, over 300 top government officials, business leaders, clergy and activists came together Sunday morn-

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

ing February 12th at Manhattan's UJA-Federation headquarters to discuss the most pressing issues of concern to the American Jewish community today, both domestically and abroad. The Jewish Community Relations Council of New York (JCRC) held its Annual Congressional Breakfast sponsored in part by Capital One Bank, which was represented by the bank's head of capital markets, Steve Tulip.

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The congressional breakfast lived up to its name, featuring both breakfast and appearances by half-a-dozen of downstate New York's representatives in Congress: Yvette Clarke, Eliot Engel, Adriano Espaillat, Hakeem Jeffries, Carolyn Maloney and Tom Suozzi.

From New York's own State Assembly, the JCRC welcomed Charles Lavine, Felix Ortiz and David Weprin, and from the New York City Council, David Green-

field, Mark Levine, Karen Koslovitz and Elizabeth Crowley. In addition to the extensive list of legislators, City Comptroller (and former Manhattan borough president) Scott Stringer and Brooklyn DA Eric Gonzalez.

"I come here every year. It's important that we stand with Israel. The JCRC has been an incredible organization not just promoting the Jewish community, but to be part of our diverse city," said Scott Stringer.

New York being the international city that it is, JCRC's bridge-building efforts extend literally across the globe, with prominent diplomats from Mexico, Belarus, Cyprus, Germany, Kosovo, Poland, Portugal and China in attendance — as well as Israel's Deputy Consul General in New York, Amir Sagie.

Sagie commended the assembled congressional leaders for their efforts in passing legislation that "not only protects Israel from existential threats ... but from the relentless campaign in international forums like the United Nations, who seek to unfairly single out and vilify Israel with such a regularity that it has become a standard operating procedure." As a specific example, the Israeli diplomat cited a "recent bill ... condemn[ing] UN Security Council resolution 2334," in which the international body censured the Jewish state for permitting construction in East Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

The deputy consul general also discussed at length the need to maintain the U.S.-Israel relationship as a non-partisan issue "at all costs" (a theme that would be picked up on by most of the congressional speakers as well). Sagie expressed optimism regarding the new presidential administration and its unabashed pro-Israel stance, but was careful to hedge his bets. "We also remain committed," he said, "to maintain-



Steve Tulip, head of Capital Markets, Capital One Bank, offered greetings on behalf of our corporate benefactor.

ing our friendship and cooperation and support for the Democrats, and liberals across the country.

"Israel has a duty to work with any U.S. administration, and all elected officials, and to stay out of domestic American politics," he added.

The 2017 JCRC breakfast was organized differently than in years past. Rather than simply giving each legislator a microphone and a time slot, the conversation was guided by a poignant set of questions solicited in advance by the event's organizers.

"The fact that there was a broad spectrum of issues that were addressed, I think was informative for those who were sitting in the audience," said JCRC executive VP and CEO Michael Miller.

While this new format limited redundancy and kept the gathering from breaking down into a competition as to how each featured speaker could sound more pro-Israel than the one preceding them, there were certain recurring themes — for instance, shared concern over the threat of a nuclear Iran. The need to maintain support for Israel as a bi-partisan issue was touched on in one way or another by most of the representatives. The recent spike in anti-Semitic incidents locally, nationally and globally was on everyone's minds (and lips), and there was no shortage of criticism of newly elected President Trump among the exclusively Democratic delegation. Of particular concern was the president's disconcerting admiration of Vladimir Putin, which Congressman Jeffries colorfully described as "playing footsie" with the Russian president.

Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney spoke at length about the importance of Holocaust education through the lens of her own experiences. She noted with pride the pivotal role played by American



Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney

Jewish leaders (e.g., the JCRC) in preserving the cultural heritage and landmarks of European Jewry. She also made mention of President Trump's decision to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day with an official statement that omitted any direct reference to Jews.

Hakeem Jeffries, who represents New York's 8th District (Brooklyn/Queens) in Congress, gave a speech more oriented towards Israel, the well-being of the Jewish state being an issue of great concern to many of his constituents. Rep. Jeffries's comments indicated both a practical familiarity with issues facing Israel and its supporters, and a nuanced understanding of their national security concerns. Describing the hostile geopolitical environment in which the Israelis find themselves, the congressman, noting that he grew up in 1980s

Crown Heights, affably joked: "I know from tough neighborhoods, and that's a tough neighborhood!"

"Obviously, when there are people bent on Israel's destruction, there's a robustness, a toughness, that Israel will naturally have to protect its survival and deal with existential threats," said Jeffries. He cited Israel's "narrow waistband" (from east to west, the country is, in places, as narrow as nine miles from the Mediterranean Coast to the border with Judea and Samaria). He then commended JCRC for promoting "the education process," of making these issues part of the public discourse.

Rep. Jeffries went on to make a rather poignant suggestion, that American pro-Israel activists would more effectively build bridges with his fellow Democrats by emphasizing how "progressive ... on the domestic front," Israel is.

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"It has the benefit," noted Jeffries, "of happening to be true."

Describing various ways in which the State of Israel promotes equality, he concluded: "Israel is a very progressive society, and progressives should embrace and

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(L to r) JCRC executive VP and CEO Michael S. Miller, event chair Zoya Raynes Friedman and Charles S. Temel, JCRC president.

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Congressman Tom Suozzi

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"Having that conversation on an annual basis deepens the relationship on both sides," he added.

Newly elected Congressman Tom Suozzi of the 3rd Congressional

District, was asked about recent meetings held by the Democratic Party leadership, and the election for party chairperson. He explained: "The Democrats are focused on demonstrating that they're strong supporters of the State of Israel," said Suozzi, "and we need to be supporting candidates who come across that way."

When asked in a follow-up interview about the possibility that Rep. Keith Ellison — whose anti-Israel statements and actions during his tenure in Congress have put American Jewish leaders on edge — may be the next DNC Chairman, Suozzi said, "I don't think I'm going to get that involved in the elections. But if I were involved, I would not be supporting Keith Ellison for that position."

Recapping the morning's events, JCRC board member Zoya Raynes Friedman, who chaired the event, commented proudly on the "broad representation," of political leadership, adding that "we had the unity that unfortunately the media doesn't always pick up. A lot of the work that the JCRC does is behind the scenes, and I think there's room to be optimistic."

Though the annual congressional breakfast is a major part of JCRC's outreach efforts, the "main event" so to speak, is their yearly gala, which is being held this year on March 29th at the Pierre, N.Y.

This year's gala is honoring New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, John Catsimatidis — billionaire business mogul, radio talk show host, and celebrated philanthropist — and his family, as well as U.S. Bank.

JCRC president Charles Temel

referred to Tom DiNapoli as "the epitome of a public servant." He noted that the State of New York is heavily invested in Israel Bonds, largely thanks to DiNapoli's efforts. Temel also praised DiNapoli's strong opposition to BDS, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement seeking to undermine Israel's existence via economic warfare and ethnic discrimination.

Similarly, CEO Michael Miller described the high esteem in which the JCRC holds Mr. Catsimatidis. "We are thrilled that we are able to honor John Catsimatidis and his family. John is considered to be one of the most civic-minded and phil-

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anthropically oriented lay leaders of New York. Despite the fact that he is not of the Jewish faith, he identifies very strongly with members of the Jewish community, let alone his support for the State of Israel over the years."

While Mr. Catsimatidis was unable to attend the breakfast, his presence was felt indirectly through Ron Spurga of United Metro Energy Corp., a local energy concern that Catsimatidis acquired and rescued from bankruptcy back in 2013, preserving the livelihoods of more than a hundred Brooklyn residents in the process.

Spurga spoke of Catsimatidis's



UJIA-Federation of New York was represented by CEO Eric Goldstein, and Lousa Chafee, Senior VP of External Relations.

Israeli community, in Israel ... and in the U.S. He's a strong, strong supporter of Israel both financially and emotionally."

While the upcoming gala will be paying homage to two visionary leaders, one each from the public and private sectors, the event itself is really about highlighting the tireless efforts of the JCRC on behalf of the community. Said Zoya Raynes Friedman: "It's a phenomenal way to get an understanding of everything the JCRC does, across the spectrum." And perhaps most importantly, to keep it going. As Miller explained, the dinner is "the central event that we have to ensure the ability of our organization to continue to do the work that we do."

To learn more about the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York — or to reserve your tickets for this year's gala, visit the website jcrny.org.

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heartfelt loyalty to his employees and the local community, including at the Gristedes and D'Agostino supermarket chains he now owns: "He looks at them as his family, and he says I will never close a Gristedes supermarket in any neighborhood, because these people are my brothers, my sisters, I've worked with them for 40, 45 years. I want them to continue to be members of the community that we're servicing."

When asked specifically about his affinities with the Jewish community, Spurga explained that Catsimatidis "has a long history of supporting causes and charities that are important to Israel and to the