



NJ Jewish leader Jeff Grayzel running for Congress as a ‘proud Jew and a proud Zionist’

A board member of his local Jewish community relations council board, Grayzel is running to succeed Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-N.J.)

By [Marc Rod](#) · August 6, 2025

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Democrat Jeff Grayzel, a leader in northwest New Jersey Jewish communal organizations and deputy mayor of Morris Township, N.J., formally launched his congressional campaign this week, running as a staunchly pro-Israel candidate in the seat that will be vacated by Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-N.J.) if she wins the state's gubernatorial race.

"I am a proud Jew and a proud Zionist, and I plan to run this race for Congress as such, as a proud Jew and as a proud Zionist. I am not going to shy away from it and everybody will know," Grayzel said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week. "I think we need leaders that are going to be more bold in addressing antisemitism in our country, and we need leaders who are going to push harder for a comprehensive solution in the Middle East, so that Israel can once and for all live in peace."

He formally filed to run for the seat, in the 11th Congressional District, on Tuesday, but has been publicly [exploring](#) a run for over a month. Grayzel said he will not run against Sherrill should she lose the gubernatorial race.

Grayzel, a two-term former mayor, is a board member of his local Jewish community relations council, chairs the local federation's Jewish civic leadership initiative, is a founding member of its "community leaders against hate" program, is a member of his synagogue board and is a member of the Jewish Museum in New York City.

He said that the genesis for his campaign came in part during a talk at the Jewish Museum by Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue. Cosgrove discussed the story of Purim and the way that Esther, its main protagonist, stepped up to change history.

"Rabbi Cosgrove challenged the audience of over 200 people to find a space in their life — because Jews are under attack on every front ... to find a space in their life big or small where you have the opportunity to step into a moment where you can make a difference," Grayzel said. "I used that as a calling for me to run for Congress."

The House candidate described the Senate Democrats who [voted last week to halt certain arms sales to Israel](#) as "short-sighted" about "what Israel's partnership in a big, broad sense means to our country, and the importance of having Israel as a continued ally."

He said that it also "saddens" him as an American and a Democrat to see the Democratic Party moving in an anti-Israel direction.

"I'm going to go to Washington to try to steer the Democratic Party back to center," Grayzel said — on a variety of issues. "Part of that is steering the Democratic Party back to understanding how important Israel is."

He said that the U.S. should never condition aid to Israel or other allies.

"Hamas is evil, and they weaponized human suffering and continue to use civilians as human shields. And we wouldn't be in the current mess if they hadn't started the war and taken hostages, and if they released the hostages, we could come to a ceasefire," Grayzel said. "They're weaponizing their people, they're weaponizing the food, and it's a total tragedy."

Grayzel said that his most central focus regarding the ongoing conflict in Gaza is freeing the hostages. He says he frequently wears hostage dog tags and a hostage ribbon pin, and that every discussion he has about Israel "starts with bringing the hostages home." He called for more pressure on Hamas and its backers.

He said that it's important to focus on the fact that the war began and continues because of Hamas, that the war cannot end until the hostages are released and that Hamas' attacks on Israel date back well before Oct. 7, 2023.

"Hamas is evil, and they weaponized human suffering and continue to use civilians as human shields. And we wouldn't be in the current mess if they hadn't started the war and taken hostages, and if they released the hostages, we could come to a ceasefire," he continued. "They're weaponizing their people, they're weaponizing the food, and it's a total tragedy."

He said that the Israeli government has also failed in living up to the highest moral standards in providing humanitarian aid in Gaza. "We can't let the situation in Gaza degrade to the point that we've let it degrade to. ... It is clear that the people of Gaza are under duress. They're not in their homes, they're living in tents, and they're hungry."

But, he reiterated, "there's going to be no end to this until the hostages are home."

He said that his criticisms of Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu do not negate the fact that he still "love[s] Israel, because I think that healthy democracies and healthy relationships in general require that we speak out when we think something is wrong."

He said that, despite his differences with Netanyahu, he believes that the prime minister deserves credit for Israel's transformation into a leading global economy, though he added that Netanyahu's current coalition is "disastrous."

While in college, Grayzel studied abroad at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and interned at Israel Aircraft Industries.

Grayzel said that, despite his disagreements with President Donald Trump, Trump deserves credit and gratitude for moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, for the Abraham Accords, for using U.S. assets to defend Israel from Iranian attacks and for ordering strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.

"When they do things right, we need to acknowledge that they do things right," Grayzel said. "I stand firmly behind President Trump's order to bomb the Iranian nuclear facilities."

He described the U.S. and Israel as having done the "dirty work for the rest of the world to literally save Western civilization" from the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon.

Grayzel said that, in the long term, he wants to see a regional peace plan to address conflicts throughout the region, including those between Israel and Iran and the Palestinians. He said he wants to see Saudi Arabia join the Abraham Accords and become "part of the solution" between Israel and the Palestinians. He said that comprehensive regional and global negotiations are necessary to permanently resolve the conflict.

He added that unilaterally recognizing a Palestinian state, as some U.S. allies plan to do, is not a real solution.

He also called for "maximum pressure" on the Iranian regime until it changes course, noting that the Iranian people are also victims of the regime's governance.

Grayzel said more broadly that transitioning toward a sustainable energy economy will undermine U.S. adversaries like Russia and China, which rely heavily on oil and oil revenues. He said he also sees oil money as driving global Islamist radicalization efforts

and as fueling antisemitic protests in the United States, including through funding anti-Israel Middle Eastern studies programs at U.S. colleges and universities.

"This is what's funding all of this chaos around the world," Grayzel said. "If we can reduce the demand for oil, we will reduce the dollars that these countries have to fund the terror. ... [The world] will be a cleaner place, but it will also be a safer place when we are on clean energy."

Grayzel said that the current antisemitism crisis in the United States is particularly personal to him because his son was a Columbia University student.

"I really think Columbia needed to be hit over the head. It's unfortunate they were not listening to ... parents, all of the communal organizations in New York City ... none of it moved the needle, none of it. And it just continued on, day after day with no change," Grayzel said. "Something needed to happen. And President Trump took the action. Whether he went too far, I think we'll wait to see what happens. ... But something needed to give with these universities."

"He had to run a gauntlet to get onto campus," Grayzel said. "Oftentimes, campus was shut down and he couldn't go to the library. He had to endure the shouting and screaming and try really, really hard not to internalize it. But he had friends that would come home crying every day. They had cry sessions back in the dorm for these kids who just couldn't take it anymore."

He said he's also been disturbed by antisemitism on campus at Rutgers, the New Jersey state university.

In contrast to many Democrats, Grayzel offered some praise for the actions the Trump administration had taken toward Columbia.

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He said he's hopeful that Trump does not use such actions "as a cudgel in another way" and that Jews will not take the blame for universities losing funding. He said he does not believe in defunding universities permanently, in dismantling the Department of Education or in defunding scientific research at universities and elsewhere.

"I think we need to lean further into what our universities can do for us, but [they have] to be safe spaces for everybody," he continued.

Grayzel testified before the [New Jersey state legislature](#) in support of legislation codifying the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, a bill which has [become a point of division](#) among some Democrats.

"Synagogues being desecrated. Jews being attacked. This isn't just happening in far away places. It's happening right here and right now in New Jersey. This is not the vision of America that our country's founders, many of whom came from this great state, had in mind," Grayzel told the legislators. "We are on the precipice, and we must move quickly to ensure that New Jersey and all of America remain a place where all forms of hate are quickly and loudly condemned."

He said that passing the bill would be the first step to send a message "that hate has no home in New Jersey."

Grayzel told JI he wants to work with colleagues in Washington who don't have sizable Jewish constituencies to help them better understand the challenges that Jewish Americans are facing, "to try to personalize the situation and make it feel real for them."

"We need to condemn the phrase, 'globalize the intifada,'" Grayzel said, calling the phrase "clearly hate speech." "For [Mamdani] not to condemn that in a city that contains so many Jews is very, very scary."

"I think there needs to be a lot more bridge-building across the parties ... on issues that affect all of us, and antisemitism is one of them," he said. "It's personal for me. I'm not just talking as a Jew who sees other Jews under attack. My family's been under attack."

Grayzel also said he's been concerned by New York City Democratic mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani, noting that what happens in New York City has a "profound impact" on the Jewish community in northern New Jersey.

"We need to condemn the phrase, 'globalize the intifada,'" Grayzel said, calling the phrase "clearly hate speech." "For [Mamdani] not to condemn that in a city that contains so many Jews is very, very scary."

He added he's concerned Mamdani's refusal to forcefully condemn such rhetoric will create permission for other candidates to follow in his footsteps.

Grayzel argued that the 11th District special election — which would happen if Sherrill wins — will be one of the first major bellweathers of the Democratic Party's direction after the New York City mayoral race. He said he hopes the upcoming elections will show there's "space in the Democratic Party" for moderates like himself and Sherrill who will stand up against antisemitism.

He would likely face stiff competition in the race — Chatham Borough Councilman and Iraq veteran Justin Strickland has already filed to run, former Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-NJ) has expressed interest in the race, and a slew of others are also seen as potential candidates

Grayzel was the first Democrat to win a local government race in his town since the early 1970s, and said he first ran for office because he was "pissed off" and believes that "it's imperative for you to be part of the solution if you want to complain."

Democrats gained control of the city council in 2018, and Grayzel became mayor, which he said showed him "how much good you can do when you're in a position of power." He later ran, unsuccessfully, for state Senate in 2021. Now he says he sees an opportunity in Congress that he doesn't want to let pass.

Outside of Israel and antisemitism, Grayzel said he anticipates leveraging his experience as an engineer to focus on building an innovation economy in the United States, which he said includes improving education and infrastructure. He said he wants to "[build] bridges" and be a "problem solver" in Washington.

He said he also wants to work toward immigration reform and find a way for long-term immigrants who have been living law-abiding lives in the country for years to receive permanent status. He said he wants to push Republicans to handle the immigration issue "in a humane way."

Grayzel said that his focus on immigration is also derived from his Jewish values and the Jewish-American immigrant experience.

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