

# The Canadian Jewish News

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# Toronto school board rejects call to censure trustee Alexandra Lulka for speaking out about antisemitism in teaching materials

/ Steve Arnold

Toronto public school trustees voted 10 to 7 to reject a report calling for the censure of Jewish trustee Alexandra Lulka, who spoke out against antisemitism in materials sent to teachers, last May.

The vote took place during a Dec. 8 meeting of the Toronto District School Board.

Jewish advocacy agencies, which mounted a campaign opposing the controversial report by the board's Integrity Commissioner that suggested Lulka violated the board's code of conduct, hailed the decision as an important first step in fixing a perceived antisemitism problem.

Despite the recommendation against her, Lulka told trustees at the start of the nearly three-hour discussion, she regrets nothing about her actions.

"I have a right and a responsibility to name and condemn antisemitism and I will never stop doing that," she said. "I had to name and shame those materials for the hateful statements they are."

She added her social media post about the materials were meant to send "an unequivocal message against all forms of hate."

The complaint, she added, "was meant to silence me, but I will not be silenced."

Lulka, who represents a ward with a large Jewish population, faced censure for a tweet that she sent in May after a TDSB employee used an opt-in email group to distribute 100 pages of material on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The documents were not vetted in advance by board managers and were later found to contain references even the integrity commissioner said were antisemitic.

The board's Human Rights Office noted the materials "could reasonably be considered to contain antisemitic material, references, or allusions" and that "materials contained in the links support the use of violence and terrorism against Israeli Jews."

Among those references was a link to the website of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a group the federal government has listed as a terrorist organization.

After hearing of this material, Lulka took to social media to call for an investigation of the process that allowed it to be sent to teachers without first being reviewed by board staff. Her post did not mention either the employee who sent the documents or Muslims or Palestinians.

Despite that, the Integrity Commissioner's report found Lulka breached the TDSB code of conduct for trustees by discriminating against Muslims and Palestinians.

The motion to reject the report came from trustee Shelley Laskin who said she "rejects the very notion that (Lulka) should be censured for calling out antisemitism when in fact some materials were found to be antisemitic."

Laskin took aim at the Integrity Commissioner's report which said that Lulka "could have carefully crafted a statement to call out the potentially harmful materials while appropriately characterizing other materials as important, positive, pro-Palestinian discourse."

"So every complaint of racism and discrimination will be called breaches if they do not also catalogue or imagine positives associated with the wrongs they're condemning? Not everything has two sides," Laskin said at the board meeting.

Laskin told the board the investigation and recommendation of censure has eroded trust. "There's now a presumption by the Jewish community that a trustee enraged by possible antisemitism is being silenced."

Other trustees, supporting Lulka, said that censuring her would place a "chill" on their comments in the future, and make them concerned to comment on community issues.

After the motion to censure was rejected, trustees passed a lengthy motion calling for an action plan to address issues raised in the integrity report, to provide training for trustees and other staff in hate speech issues. Special provincial funding will also be sought to develop the plan.

Jewish advocacy groups hailed the decision to reject the Integrity Commissioner's report.

"We applaud the decision of trustees to reject the double standard that was being applied to Trustee Lulka," said Noah Shack, vice-president of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs. "Despite this, there is still a lot of education work to be done at TDSB."

B'nai Brith Canada agreed. "There was never any basis for censoring Trustee Lulka, and the 'investigation' into her actions appears to have been nothing but a contrived witch-hunt," CEO Michael Mostyn said in a news release after the meeting.

"However, this saga is far from over. The TDSB needs to come clean about its initial handling of this issue in May, as well as its deeply flawed investigation. B'nai Brith will not rest until the entire truth is revealed and systemic antisemitism is defeated at the TDSB."

Michael Levitt, CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre, added: "We commend each and every TDSB trustee who voted in support of Trustee Alexandra Lulka and her right to speak out against antisemitism. The trustees understood that censure would set a chilling precedent and impact trustees' abilities to stand up to hate and discrimination."

Critics of the report noted its conclusions were based on an investigation by a Toronto law firm, including a lawyer whose comments on social media called into question her impartiality.

With that history, B'nai Brith and CIJA said Morgan Sim should have declared a conflict of interest on the investigation.

"It's clear that this individual investigator has taken public positions on the matters being discussed and that raises serious questions of potential bias and conflict of interest," Shack said.

"This was a flawed process that led to a flawed conclusion, but the majority of trustees stood up for a colleague's right to call out antisemitism," he added.

The online meeting drew about 70 participants, including trustees. ■

# Toronto gift basket company says its treats are kosher—but the Orthodox Union says otherwise

/ Steve Arnold

Just in time for gift basket season, the Orthodox Union is warning consumers away from a Toronto-area supplier of such treats.

The kosher certification agency alleges, in a post on its website, that its trademark hechsher is being abused by a Scarborough, Ont. company called Gifting Kosher, a purveyor of baskets filled with chocolate, wine and other indulgences.

To protect its trademark, the OU said “corrective measures are being implemented.”

“We are aware of this,” said Rabbi Chanoch Sofer, one of several rabbinic co-ordinators of the OU’s kashrut division. “It’s a misuse of the OU symbol. We never gave them a certification and we are in the middle of legal action against them.”

Rabbi Sofer added the agency is not claiming the products offered by Gifting Kosher are treif, it is only alleging some items marked with the OU hechsher have not been certified by the agency.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say we claim they are not kosher because we don’t know where they get the products,” he said.

The OU’s website specifically alleges chocolate under the brand names Bruges and Latiere “and any other brand of The Gift Group” as improperly using the agency’s symbol.

Gifting Kosher is one of a number of gift basket companies operating under the corporate umbrella of The Gift Group. The company offers gift baskets, dog and cat treats and supplies, flowers and floral arrangements, healthy gift baskets, kosher food, wine and beer subscriptions.

Oakville lawyer Orië Niedzviecki has received two such gift baskets from a grateful client and found both contained non-kosher products.

“I opened it up and thought there’s very little in here that’s actually marked kosher,” he said in an interview. “Only one bottle of wine and a box of crackers were marked as kosher. There were cheeses and dips and crackers, but none of them were marked as kosher. There was no marking on them at all.”

Niedzviecki said he contacted the company but never got a satisfactory answer, other than an offer to send him the kosher

labels from the original packaging of the items he was sent.

“They wrote back and gave me this ridiculous answer that some of the products might be missing kosher symbols,” he said. “Then they say if you’d like the kosher labels to be forwarded, we can request that the original packaging be forwarded, but it would take four to six weeks.”

“I never heard from them again and I didn’t bother following it up because I figured it wasn’t worth the trouble,” he added.

In an emailed response to Niedzviecki the company said “Since our kosher products are outsourced from several different suppliers throughout North America, and then carefully sorted and packaged individually by our production department within our warehouses, there is a possibility that some of the products delivered might not feature the original kosher symbols. However, we can assure you that the products delivered are kosher certified, as confirmed by our suppliers.”

The second gift, from the same client, did contain more products properly labelled—but also others that had kosher labels stuck on the packaging or with stickers promising they were made with kosher ingredients.

The CJN also emailed the company several weeks ago asking about kosher certification, but received only a stock response saying the issue would be addressed within 72 hours.

Vicky Shizgal, of Montreal, also received a basket from Gifting Kosher and said in an interview she was shocked when she thought to look for kosher certification on some of the baked goods it contained.

“I received a basket from an organization and I assumed of course they’re not going to send me something that’s not kosher and I just started eating all the baked goods, and then it dawned on me I didn’t see any certification.

“I started to investigate and the people who sent it to me were mortified, they had no idea, they thought this was a reputable company.”

While there’s no clear definition in Canadian law about what constitutes a kosher product, the issue for Shizgal and Niedzviecki is allegations the OU symbol has been attached to products without approval.

“When I talk to my friends about what is kosher, we know it is something with a hechsher from an organization that we accept,” Niedzviecki said.

“Every kosher consumer knows very well you need to check, that somebody simply saying something is kosher is not enough. Whatever level you’re at you have to make sure you’re getting it from someone you trust,” he added. “I guess it’s up to the consumer to make sure what is meant when you say you’re selling something kosher.” ■

Steve Arnold was a longtime *Hamilton Spectator* business reporter who now contributes regularly to The CJN.



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the **cjn** magazine

# Cabinet minister Karina Gould talks about the pandemic challenges of distributing vaccines, becoming a new parent and rising antisemitism

/ Mitchell Consky

Being a new mother during a pandemic is a difficult feat for anyone, but it's especially so when you're also the youngest female cabinet minister in Canadian history.

With such a label comes tremendous responsibility, but Karina Gould, the first federal cabinet minister to give birth while holding office, seems not to be bothered by the pressure.

"I think anytime you're a new mom it's difficult to juggle, no matter what your work is," Gould, currently Minister of Families, Children and Social Development said in a recent interview with The CJN.

"Like most parents across the country I didn't have daycare. So it was an interesting struggle to be a very busy cabinet minister with a two-year-old at home."

Her son, Oliver, now three, was cared for by Gould and her husband Alberto Geronés in their home in Burlington, Ont., a city of around 175,000, northwest of Toronto, where Gould grew up. "I have to give full credit to my husband who stepped up in incredible ways so I can continue to work on behalf of Canadians," she said.

A graduate of McGill University and the University of Oxford, Gould was first elected as the Member of Parliament for Burlington in 2015, at the age of 28, and her list of federal responsibilities has only grown longer over the years. She has served as Minister of International Development, Minister of Democratic Institutions, and, most recently, Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development.

In 2018, the birth of her son inspired important public conversations about the struggles of parliamentary parents who are not entitled to parental leave—a result of not paying into Employment Insurance. (At the time, the Liberals had pledged a gender equity-themed budget, promising to institute a parental leave program for parliamentarians, but the plan has seemingly gone stale.) During her maternity leave, Gould worked from home instead of on Parliament Hill—an alternative that would become all too normalized a couple years later.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Gould's primary objective with the federal government has been to respond to the challenge of COVID internationally. She helped allocate over \$2 billion worth of additional support and international assistance for COVID relief plans, and worked to implement Canada's vaccine

sharing program, which distributed excess doses to vulnerable regions throughout the world. As a co-chair of Covax, a global collaboration led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, she oversaw international access to COVID tests, treatments, and vaccines.

In mid-November, two weeks into her new portfolio, Gould visited Edmonton with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to announce a childcare agreement for Alberta, which aims to reduce the costs of daycare for families over a five-year period.

But Gould's tenure has also attracted controversy. In January, as Minister of International Development, Gould was the subject of criticism while overseeing the 2020 Liberal pledge of \$24 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), an organization previously under fire with reports of corruption and close affiliation with Hamas. (The Liberals reinstated funding to UNRWA in 2016, after it had been suspended by Stephen Harper's Conservatives).

The criticism intensified with evidence that textbooks produced by UNRWA denounced Arab states over the Abraham Accords and called for the banishment of Jews from Israel. Following these reports, Gould made a public statement, promising to investigate any problematic or controversial material, but three subsequent reports released by the IMPACT-se monitoring group showed that UNRWA's educational material is still loaded with violence-inciting content, such as erasing Israel from textbook maps, and encouraging children to wage jihad against "the Enemy."

When questioned about this in the House of Commons on May 3, 2021, Gould said the following: "This government stands against antisemitism, and we have been very clear about that. As soon as I learned about this material I was deeply concerned and contacted my officials, as well as UNRWA itself, to get to the bottom of this. I have been in touch with counterparts around the world, and we are working with the UNRWA to ensure that the materials it teaches, which are provided by the jurisdiction in which it operates, meet UN values and uphold the principles of neutrality."

Conservative MP Marty Morantz, who is also the Canadian representative of the Inter-Parliamentary Task Force to Combat Online Antisemitism, said he doesn't believe enough was done to mitigate the controversy. "I have a serious problem with the idea of Canadian tax dollars going to fund the dissemination of school materials that teach young Palestinian children how to hate Jews.

"In my mind, the government's position has been the same for many years—the support is for a two-state solution, for two states to live side by side in peace and security, and that seems wholly inconsistent with the idea of teaching a generation of Palestinian children exactly the opposite."

The conflict between Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Israel in May sparked an uptick of antisemitic hate crimes throughout Canada. Gould, a descendant of Holocaust survivors, doesn't take this lightly.

Her paternal grandparents, from Czechoslovakia, were dating as teenagers before being separated in 1938, after they had moved to Prague to avoid the Nazi invasion.

"My great-grandfather, on my grandmother's side, was very adamant that they had to leave," Gould said. "He felt intensely

what was coming.” Her grandmother managed to board one of the last ships leaving Poland to England, where she would stay with a Christian family who attempted to convert her to Christianity (unsuccessfully).

Her grandfather, at age 19, and his brother, age 17, stayed in Prague, and were ultimately deported to Theresienstadt, then to Dachau, and finally to Auschwitz. Young and healthy, they managed to survive the torturous conditions of the concentration camps, avoiding gas chamber selections and random executions.

Shortly before liberation in 1945, the two brothers were forced into a final death march with 300 Jewish prisoners. Only 49 survived, including Gould’s grandfather and great-uncle. After the war, Gould’s grandparents reunited.

Her parents met in Israel—her mother, who is not Jewish, was from Germany—and they moved to Canada, a country that provided ample opportunity for education and economic growth, as well as the promise of equality and diversity.

Of course, though, such ideals weren’t as entrenched in Canadian society as the history books might claim—a past of residential schools, colonial enforcement, systemic racism, and antisemitism were still lurking beneath the promises of this welcoming land.

Amidst apparent progress, increasing cases of antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Black and Asian hate crimes, along with Holocaust denial—and glorification—have made the headlines of national newspapers in recent years.

“I feel such a sense of responsibility to make sure that the story of my family is known, and that it reinforces the need to look at the other as human,” Gould said. “It must teach us to remember and experience and live that shared humanity, and it must guide us in our current understanding of each other. It’s so unimaginable to see what happens when you don’t look at another human being as a human being.”

Gould also sees the imperative for Holocaust education to enable a deeper awareness of the cruelties that were historically imposed—in part, to avoid sloppy comparisons with pandemic restrictions, which have become prominent on social media. “You can’t compare what the Nazis did to some of the things that they are comparing it to now,” Gould said.

In recent months there have been trending tweets comparing proof of vaccination mandates with the Star of David sewn on the clothing of Jews during the Holocaust.

“That is why education is so important—so people understand what we are actually talking about, and what we’re trying to ensure never happens again,” she explained.

Her list of responsibilities, as a mother, MP, community advocate, and descendant of survivors, seems endless. Beneath it all, according to Gould, is the desire to give Canadians equal opportunity—whether it’s providing life-saving vaccines, lowering the cost of daycare, or telling the story of what happens when the flames of hatred are fanned.

“My grandmother would tell me this story of when she was 16 years old in high school, and the headmistress asked her to get up in her class because she was Jewish,” Gould said. “She then left Czechoslovakia and never went back. Her family knew there was a danger just by virtue of who they were. That is not something we can tolerate in our society. And we need to understand what that risk is.” ■

# Melissa Lantsman has completed the leap from Thornhill to Ottawa

/ Ellin Bessner

When the new session of Parliament started in late November, the job of asking the first question in the House of Commons after the Speech from the Throne was given to Melissa Lantsman, the rookie Conservative MP from the riding of Thornhill.

It put a new spotlight on the former political strategist, even if she was no stranger to media attention, after years of appearing on political pundit panels. (For a few months, she also co-hosted the *Bonjour Chai* podcast on The CJN Podcast Network.)

“Mr. Speaker: It is an honour to rise in the House of Commons for the very first time as the Member of Parliament for the riding of Thornhill,” Lantsman said, as her colleagues cheered and clapped.

Then she went on the attack, gesturing animatedly with her arms, as she scolded the Liberal government for barely talking about the inflation crisis that is impacting her constituents.

“Can the Member opposite tell Canadians what measures in today’s speech, in which inflation was mentioned a grand total of one time, will address the cost of living in my community, in Thornhill?”

Being tapped to ask the lead off question was just another display of the confidence which Opposition Leader Erin O’Toole has in Lantsman, 38, who handily won her seat in Canada’s most Jewish federal riding, north of Toronto. (Jews represent 37 percent of the population.) It was previously held by former broadcaster Peter Kent—who threw his support behind his successor when he decided to retire after a 13-year political career.

Lantsman was named to the Tories’ shadow cabinet on Nov. 9, as official opposition critic for the transportation file. She’s the only Jewish MP in that high profile role, and is one of only two Conservative MPs elected in the 44th Parliament—along with Winnipeg’s Marty Morantz, from Winnipeg. Lantsman is also the first MP who’s both Jewish and LGBTQ+.

Soon after, another sign of her importance to the party: Lantsman prominently appeared in a well-received Conservative video declaring how they are ready to fight for Canada.

Whether it’s keeping on top of how the government is responding to the flooded roads and damaged rail lines in B.C., or criticizing the new rules for COVID-19 testing at airports that are impacting returning Canadians, Lantsman has embraced her new life as the go-to questioner in Ottawa.

“I’m not unfamiliar with how much time it is going to take, and how much you have to devote to being a good parliamentarian, because there are a lot of different hats that you’ve got to wear,” Lantsman told *The CJN Daily*, referring to her previous stints as a former political staffer herself, beginning with the Stephen Harper government.

Later, she headed the war room for Ontario Premier Doug Ford's 2018 election campaign, and after his victory, she joined Hill and Knowlton, a Toronto public relations firm.

"I thrive in those kinds of environments," she added. "I'm a little bit less rubber-chicken dinner and a little bit more giving out packages of chicken to those who need it."

In late October, Lantsman was sworn in during a special ceremony in Ottawa and she chose to bring an ArtScroll bible. Her move-in plans for the Ottawa office in the Confederation Building included a distinctive mezuzah to the door. The artifact is made out of parts of an Iron Dome rocket, and had previously been a gift from the late Rabbi Reuven Bulka to Peter Kent.

"Let's have fun in the office, put a mezuzah up, and make sure that the constituents of Thornhill know that this is a welcoming place to choose," she said, "and that a Jewish person now occupies that seat." ■

Read more at [thecjn.ca/melissa-lantsman-profile](https://thecjn.ca/melissa-lantsman-profile)

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## Ya'ara Saks is settling into Parliament Hill after a very virtual year

/ Ellin Bessner

Just days after she first rose to speak in the physical House of Commons, after a year on the electronic Liberal backbench, Ya'ara Saks was named to the job of parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development.

The appointment makes sense, as Saks, 48, has worked in the social services field in Toronto—specifically related to mental health and trauma—before she made the jump into politics and won a by-election in the York Centre riding in October 2020. She also ran a yoga business.

Saks, who replaced former Jewish MP Michael Levitt, will be working with Karina Gould, who happens to be the only Jewish cabinet minister in the new 44th Parliament. (Levitt stepped down from politics to head the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.)

"As we move forward for everyone, it's essential that society reflects one that's inclusive, with opportunity for all starting with our youngest Canadians and their families," Saks posted on social media in a statement accompanied by photo of herself hugging her two daughters.

The appointment by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came on the heels of Saks co-organizing the annual "Hanukkah on the Hill" menorah lighting ceremony with Jewish colleague Anthony Housefather, the Liberal MP for Mount Royal.

After last year's Hanukkah event, Saks received an antisemitic

death threat. Clearly rattled, the new MP asked for extra security in her North York community. Subsequently, with a spike in incidents across country, and a deluge of anti-Israel rhetoric, Saks pushed the prime minister to convene a national emergency summit on antisemitism. It was held in July.

At the Dec. 1 holiday celebration, which they decided to hold in a hybrid fashion—partly in person but mostly by Zoom—Saks was encouraged when over 400 people, including political leaders from all parties, joined from around North America and even Australia.

"Hanukkah candles are the light that Judaism brings into the world when we are unafraid to announce our identity in public and to live by our values, our principles, and fight when necessary alongside our friends for our freedom," Saks told the audience. "We cannot and should not have to do this alone—and it's clear by tonight that we aren't."

Due to the pandemic, Saks wasn't able to physically go to Ottawa during the previous Parliament, and represented her constituents while virtually working from home.

After the opening of Parliament on Nov. 22, which she attended in person, Saks was excited to actually take possession of her office on the Hill.

For her second swearing-in ceremony, Saks brought her personal Jewish prayer book that she used as a student at Associated Hebrew Schools in Toronto, and also one of her daughters' bibles from Netivot HaTorah elementary school in Vaughan, Ont. Saks also planned to affix a mezuzah that one of her daughters had made to her Ottawa office door.

"I think that it's really important that we emphasize that Judaism isn't this kind of 'out there' thing, it's very personal to each and every one of us in how we identify and how we shape our lives," Saks told *The CJA Daily*.

"You know, whether it's a Hanukkah party in the office or these personal touches, it's not always about the Canadiana, it's about really who we are and what we bring to Parliament as ourselves." ■

Read more at [thecjn.ca/yaara-saks-profile](https://thecjn.ca/yaara-saks-profile)

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## Annamie Paul talks about why she resigned from the Greens—and what's next

/ Mitchell Consky

Former Green Party Leader Annamie Paul broke her silence after a federal election campaign plagued with party infighting and allegations of racism, sexism and antisemitism, at a virtual event Nov. 30 where she discussed the incidents that led to her resignation from the party.

“It was painful for me and I’m betting it was painful for a lot of people who felt prematurely pushed out of politics,” Paul said at a program hosted by the Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee.

Political commentator David Herle, who was a top advisor to former Prime Minister Paul Martin and a chief campaign strategist for the Liberal Party of Canada moderated the event, which was Paul’s first public appearance since her resignation.

Paul, a lawyer, former diplomat, and social entrepreneur, is the first Black Canadian and first Jewish woman to be elected leader of a federal party in Canadian history. After a difficult campaign, which saw her budget stripped and legal challenges from the Green Party executive, she submitted her resignation in October, after not winning a seat in Parliament during this year’s federal election.

Herle asked Paul about the position of her critics within the Green Party towards Israel. “There are many people who joined the party for many different reasons,” Paul said. “There are some who have very genuine, heartfelt and legitimate criticisms of some of the policies of the State of Israel, and there are others that use criticism towards the State of Israel or Zionism as cover for antisemitism, and everything in between.

“My experience over the last couple of years is that it has become easier and easier to say more and more hateful, inflammatory, provocative things about the Jewish community with impunity. We can go on any given day and see examples of that all over social media. I think that should be a real concern to everyone that wants to see hate defeated, because it certainly has been emboldened over the last period of time.”

Paul, who first decided to seek political leadership over two years ago, holds a Master of Public Affairs from Princeton University and a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Ottawa. She refused to comment definitively on trends in antisemitism tied to political allegiance, and pointed out that, according to recent data, such hatred can be found on all ends of the political spectrum.

Paul explained that the reasons for her resignation were a lack of internal support, disorganization of delegative power, and general incohesiveness throughout the Green Party. “The model is really one where the Leader is the chief spokesperson,” she said.

She claimed that she was not granted the ability to appoint the political director, communications director, the executive director, the funding director, or any positions of power beyond her chief of staff and those who worked in her office. “I had none of those powers whatsoever... I really had to inherit the

infrastructure that was there and my former job was really to try and communicate effectively the policies of our members.”

Paul also explained that pandemic restrictions had a significant impact on her campaign. “I really wanted to be out there all the time, everywhere across the country. I think that when you become the leader of a national party, and you’re unknown—I was under no illusion: no one knew me from Adam—that my job really was going to be to be out there all the time, criss-crossing the country, meeting our members, connecting with Canadians.

“We tried so many times. We planned itineraries and made tentative reservations, and then there would be a lockdown and we just couldn’t do that sort of travel.”

Herle asked Paul if her Jewish faith played a role in her decision to enter the political arena. “It’s so important if you’re going to make the leap into organized politics and join a party to really try not to have your beliefs, your values, your principles, in conflict with your political life,” she said.

“For me, being part of a community that believes very much in our interconnectedness, very much in the influence we have on each other—you know *tikkun olam* is a very big concept in the Jewish community—certainly means that politics can be an extension of that. And for me, I wanted my political life to reflect my personal values and beliefs.”

Paul explained that she is uncertain about her political future, and is currently ascribing to the widespread advice to “not think about it too much.”

Canada is currently in a pattern of minority governments, which is an unfortunate development she said.

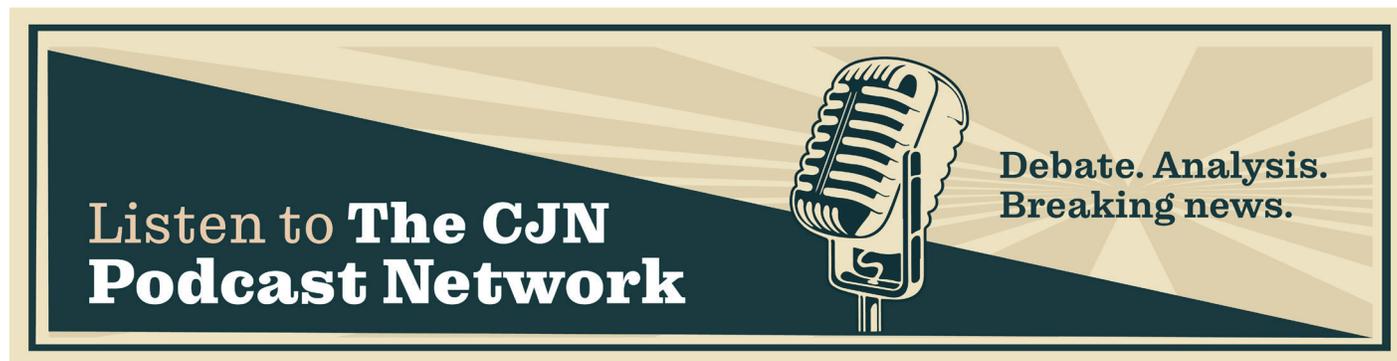
“We certainly have designed a lot of elaborate technology that allows us to micro-target our voters. We don’t have to appeal to the general public in the same way we did before in order to win elections.

“It’s becoming easier and easier to take the safe road—so much of the focus is on creating that winning coalition of votes across the country, that parties aren’t willing to take the same risks that they have before.

“And that’s a pity because it really is a total contradiction to what we need at this moment, which really are big, bold, innovative ideas to tackle unprecedented challenges.”

CJPAC, which organized the talk, is a national, independent organization with a mandate to engage Jewish and pro-Israel Canadians in the democratic process. ■

**Mitchell Consky is a Toronto-based journalist and a new contributor to The CJNI.**



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# Why it's Hanukkah until at least January in the Quebec town of Disraeli

/ Ellin Bessner

Canada Post has brought Hanukkah to a small Quebec town named after a former Jewish prime minister of Great Britain.

The only post office in Disraeli, with a population of about 2,500 people, is now the home of the first-ever permanent Jewish pictorial postmark to be created for mail in Canada, showing four dreidels and a fully lit menorah.

Disraeli is located about an hour away from Sherbrooke. Nathalie Fortier is the postmaster, and she admits she had never heard of Hanukkah before, nor about the politician, who later identified as Christian—which allowed him to pursue a career in public office.

But that's all changed since Irv Osterer, an Ottawa stamp enthusiast, wrote to her about his project to create Canada's first-ever Jewish "special pictorial cancel," as they're called.

"I agreed to participate because I hadn't known about the story of Disraeli, and I was very fortunate to do it, even though there are no Jewish people in this area," Fortier told *The CJA*.

Osterer is a retired Ottawa school teacher. He's also a graphic designer. Three years ago, he approached Canada Post to do a Jewish special postmark. There are about 50 communities in Canada that have their own unique year-round postmarks, including the most famous one at the post office in Vulcan, Alberta: in 2016, theirs honoured the late *Star Trek* actor Leonard Nimoy, the Jewish actor who played Spock.

"When I was teaching high school, I used to involve my students with doing Christmas postmarks at Christmas Island (Nova Scotia), and the Valentine ones at Love, Saskatchewan," Osterer said. "The postmasters at these places love getting letters from all over the world. It's a celebration of our diversity in this country."

Osterer had to find a location that resonated with Canadian Jews, or had a Jewish-sounding name. At first, he thought of Vulcan, but they had one, so he considered Edenbridge, a former Jewish farm colony in Saskatchewan.

One of Osterer's friends, the late Motti Feldman, had family from there. Jews from Lithuania arrived via South Africa at the turn of the 20th century to establish a farming community near Brooksby—and came up with a name that would be meaningful to them, but still accepted by the province.

"There used to be a post office there, but it is no more," Osterer said, explaining why he needed to come up with a Plan B.

"Then I'm looking through and I remember there's a place in Quebec named after Benjamin Disraeli. And how more Jewish can the name be, then?"

Disraeli was born to a Jewish family in England in 1804, and although the Victorian-era figure was converted to Christianity as a teenager, the Conservative politician remained proud of his Jewish roots. He suffered from antisemitism during his long career in politics. He was close to the Rothschilds and supported a homeland for the Jewish people.

"So I thought, if it couldn't be Edenbridge, Disraeli sounds like a great name."

In October, Canada Post notified Osterer that the proposal had been accepted. Usually, in-house designers do up the special artistic postmarks, but Osterer wanted to make sure it would be done correctly, according to Jewish traditions.

In 2017, a series of Hanukkah postage stamps had to be hastily recalled on the day Canada Post put them on sale because the booklet cover showed a yellow Star of David—an embarrassing detail which was presumably only noticed after the fact.

"I'm going to do it so that you can use it and you're not going to have any troubles with it," Osterer said. "And they sort of hemmed and hawed and I said, 'I want to do this, especially in memory of Rabbi [Reuven] Bulka because Rabbi Bulka was involved with the production of [our country's] Hanukkah stamps [after the 2017 fiasco].'"

The design needed to be about the size of a Toonie, the Canadian two dollar coin. Osterer put in four dreidels at the bottom, with *Nes Gadol Haya Sham*, and a fully lit menorah with eight flames and the central flame for the shamash.

There's plenty of space left for the date, and the town's name.

Canada Post didn't pay for the work. A spokesperson said the whole postmark project cost about \$100.

According to Elia Anoaia, the manager of stamp services for Canada Post, this was the first time a design has been adopted from someone outside of the postal service and the first time the post office adopted a permanent pictorial postmark with a Jewish theme.

The postmaster, Nathalie Fortier, actually applies the postmark by hand, herself, using an ink stamp. The cards and letters don't go through a machine, and are given "handle with care" treatment to avoid smudging the postmark.

So far, she has received requests from about twenty customers, from Western Canada, the United States, Japan and Siberia.

Some, like Osterer, asked her to cancel envelopes with the new 2021 Hanukkah stamps on them, which he will then send as gifts to other stamp enthusiasts and collectors.

Fortier believes some of the requests contained greeting cards for Hannukah being sent by Jewish people to their Jewish relatives.

Although she typically processes 200 to 300 pieces of mail a day in Disraeli, she's using the Hanukkah pictorial postmark on all of it, even Christmas cards.

"People can see it, and can learn about Hanukkah," Fortier said, adding that her post office also sells the seasonal stamp booklets, which contain information about the Jewish holiday and its corresponding customs. "We are Catholic but we are welcoming souls and we are open to learning about other religions, because it is fun to learn these things." ■

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