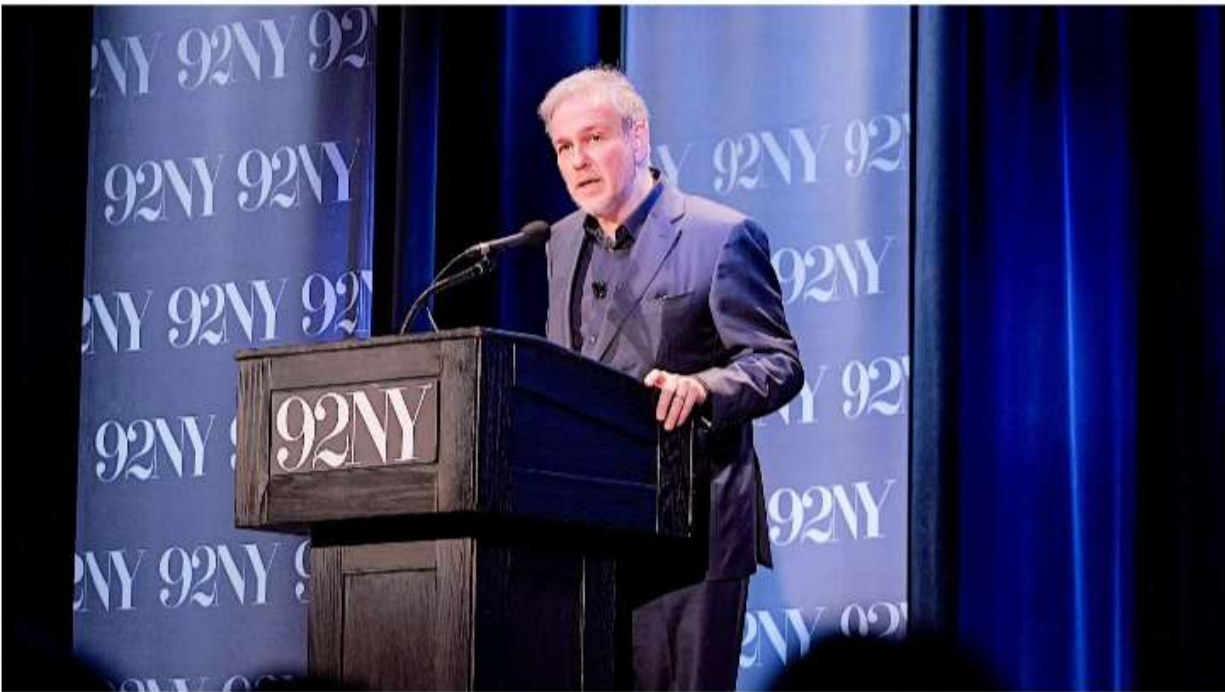


## United States

# In 92NY talk, Bret Stephens urges 'dismantling' ADL and investing more in Jewish identity

Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the ADL, was in the audience for a talk he called "misguided."

By [Andrew Silow-Carroll](#) February 2, 2026



New York Times columnist Bret Stephens delivered the "State of World Jewry" talk at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, Feb. 1, 2026. (Peter Jamus/Michael Priest Photography)

In a speech that described antisemites as an "axis of the perfidious, the despotic, the hypocritical, the cynical, the deranged and the incurably stupid," Bret Stephens asserted that supporters of the Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish defense groups should largely abandon their current strategy for combating antisemitism and instead redirect their resources toward strengthening Jewish life itself.

Stephens, the conservative New York Times columnist and founder of the Jewish thought journal *Sapir*, said antisemitism is largely impervious to appeals to tolerance, reminders of Jewish and Israeli accomplishments, or mandatory Holocaust education.

Instead, he called for large-scale investment in Jewish day schools, cultural institutions, philanthropy, media, publishing and religious leadership, arguing that the infrastructure already exists but lacks sufficient scale and coordination.

“What we call the fight against antisemitism, which consumes tens of millions of dollars every year in Jewish philanthropy and has become an organizing principle across Jewish organizations, is a well-meaning, but mostly wasted effort,” Stephens said, delivering the annual “State of World Jewry” address at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan on Sunday. “We should spend the money and focus our energy elsewhere.”

In an on-stage conversation after the talk, Stephens told Rabbi David Ingber, the Y’s senior director for Jewish life, that if it were up to him, he would “dismantle” the ADL, the leading Jewish group fighting antisemitism.

“That’s not how Jewish money should be spent,” Stephens told Ingber, acknowledging that the ADL’s CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, was in the audience. “That’s not helping raise a generation of young Jews who are conscious of their Jewishness as something other than the fact that they saw ‘Schindler’s List’ and they visited the Holocaust Museum. That cannot be the locus of Jewish identity. If we’re going to survive, victimization cannot be at the heart of our identity.”

Reached the next day, Greenblatt said he considered Stephens a friend and described his thoughts on Jewish identity as “powerful and provocative,” but found Stephens’ critique of efforts to combat antisemitism “misguided.”

Greenblatt said the ADL’s functions include collecting data on hate crimes, training synagogues and other Jewish institutions in security and a Center on Extremism that gathers intelligence that has been used to “intercept and prevent plots from unfolding that literally could take the lives of people in our community.”

Greenblatt said he agreed on the value of investing in Jewish education and centering identity. “I profoundly agree that the best defense against antisemitism is a good offense, and yet you cannot deny the necessity of defense, that you will not have a strong Jewish community if you don’t have a safe Jewish community,” he told JTA. “You cannot have what Bret called a thriving Jewish people if they’re constantly under threat. So I just don’t agree that it’s a binary choice.”

Stephens' remarks about the ADL come at a time when the organization has been under fire from the left and right. While many on the left object to its Israel advocacy and accuse it of cozying up to the Trump administration, right-wing critiques have included accusations that it has supported “woke” policies and that [its advocacy has been ineffective in countering antisemitism on the far left and far right](#).

Asked about these critiques, Greenblatt said that the ADL, as one of the oldest anti-hate organizations in the country, has become a convenient target for partisans, inside and outside the Jewish community, who are frustrated by the persistence of bigotry and eager to discredit their ideological opposites. “I think this blame game is bad for America, and I think it’s lethal for our Jewish community,” he said.



Rabbi David Ingber, left, interviews Bret Stephens after the New York Times columnist delivered remarks at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, Feb. 1, 2026. (Peter Jamus/Michael Priest Photography)

The State of World Jewry speech has been a tradition at the influential New York cultural center since 1980, and has been given by, among others, Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel and the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy.

For the third year in a row it has been delivered by a prominent center-right pundit. Like Stephens, [author and podcaster Dan Senor](#) (2025) and [journalist Bari Weiss](#) (2024) suggested that the strongest response to a community reeling from antisemitism in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks is for Jews to turn inward and invest in their own institutions rather than seeking inclusion or protection within broader coalitions.

Elsewhere, writers on the Jewish left, including Eric Alterman in [the Forward](#) and [The New Republic](#) and [Michelle Goldberg of the New York Times](#), have focused on what they see as a gap between a conservative Jewish establishment and a liberal Jewish majority troubled by the extent of the war in Gaza. While condemning the Hamas attacks and antisemitism on

the left and right, they argue that anti-Zionism is not necessarily antisemitism, and Jewish groups should prioritize liberal, democratic values over unconditional defense of Israel.

“I don’t think that we made an ideological choice,” Ingber told JTA, when asked about the recent lineup of speakers. “It’s where the center of gravity is at this moment. Voices like [Stephens’ and] Bari’s and Dan’s are seriously engaging with the complexity of this situation, and in some ways mirror a little bit of what’s happening more broadly in Israel” and beyond.

“I don’t think it means that we endorse their worldview, but it means that the Jewish community is benefitting from their platform,” he continued.

Stephens, who told Ingber that he was a “gadfly” on the typically liberal opinion pages of the New York Times, laid out four arguments in his talk: that the fight against antisemitism is largely ineffective; that antisemitism functions as a perverse compliment rooted in resentment; that Jews should stop trying to disprove hatred through achievement or moral suasion; and that Jewish survival depends on building independent institutions rather than seeking acceptance from broader society.

Stephens questioned whether decades of investment in education, advocacy and monitoring — the core strategies of organizations such as the ADL and campus advocacy groups — have produced measurable results, even as antisemitic beliefs and incidents have increased.

“Does anyone think the fight against antisemitism is working?” he asked.

As evidence, Stephens pointed to [polling data showing that “one in five millennials and Gen Zs believe the Jews caused the Holocaust,”](#) as well as the persistence of antisemitic rhetoric in media, politics and academia during a period when Jewish institutions are, he said, more engaged and better funded than ever.

In this, Stephens joined a number of observers who have been questioning [the cost and effectiveness of efforts to combat antisemitism, which have surged in recent years.](#)

“The mistake we make is this: We think that antisemitism stems fundamentally from missing or inaccurate information. We think that if people only had greater knowledge of the history of Jewish persecution, a fuller grasp of the facts of the Israeli-Arab conflict, a finer understanding of all the ways antisemitism manifests itself, a deeper appreciation of the Jewish contribution to America’s success and to human flourishing worldwide, that the hatred of us might dissipate or never start in the first place,” he said. “That thesis is wrong.”

Stephens framed antisemitism as a response to Jewish distinctiveness, which acts as a counterculture in authoritarian or conformist societies, and resentment, especially when Jewish communities flourish.

“They do not hate us because of our faults and failures,” Stephens said. “They hate us because of our virtues and successes.”

Stephens criticized what he described as a persistent Jewish impulse to seek validation through their contributions to the wider society — citing Jewish participation in progressive movements and Israeli peace initiatives as examples that failed to reduce hostility.

“Constantly seeking to prove ourselves worthy in order to win the world’s love is a fool’s errand,” he said.

That argument led to Stephens’ fourth and final point: that Jews should invest in building and expanding their own institutions rather than seeking inclusion or protection within broader coalitions.

Quoting composer Philip Glass, Stephens said, “If there’s no room at the table, build your own table.”

“We have superb Jewish day schools, but we need many more of them,” he said. “We have astounding and vibrant cultural institutions... We have extraordinary Jewish philanthropies, but they need to become a primary locus of Jewish giving.”

Just as Senor did in his 2025 talk at the Y, Stephens framed the current moment — marked by rising antisemitism and social alienation — as an opportunity for Jewish renewal and not merely a period of crisis. Referring to [“Oct. 8 Jews,” a term he popularized after Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on Israel](#), Stephens said he had come to rethink his own definition of traumatized Jews in more positive terms.

“What I should have said was that the ‘Oct. 8 Jew’ was the one who woke up trying to remember who he or she truly is,” he said.

Stephens’ conversation with Ingber was twice interrupted by hecklers, who were promptly escorted out by security. Before the talk, a group of demonstrators outside the venue waved Palestinian flags and chanted, “Free, free Palestine.” Ingber said demonstrators taunted him and others who attended the talk as they exited the building.