

ISRAEL

Meet Amichai Chikli, Israel's new Diaspora minister, who opposes BDS and Reform Judaism

BY ANDREW LAPIN JANUARY 5, 2023



Amichai Chikli, soon to be appointed as head of Israel's Diaspora Affairs and Combat Antisemitism Ministry, attends a committee meeting at the Knesset, the Israeli parliament in Jerusalem, on December 6, 2022. (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

(JTA) – The Israeli ministry responsible for engaging with the half of the world's Jews who don't live in Israel has gotten a new name – and a leader who disdains the values of many American Jews.

Amichai Chikli announced during his swearing-in ceremony Monday that his ministry was changing its name the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs to the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and the Struggle Against Antisemitism. The name change is a sign that Chikli could plan to focus on the problems of the Diaspora more than his predecessors, who have focused largely on promoting Israel to Diaspora Jews.

Chikli is the son of a Conservative rabbi who lives on a kibbutz founded by the Conservative movement of Judaism, which he defends but says he no longer identifies with. He vaulted into prominence within Israel last year when he became the first member of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, to break with then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett over Bennett's decision to form an alliance with left-wing and Arab parties.

Though Chikli holds some views promoted by Diaspora Jews, he is disdainful of Reform Judaism, the largest denomination in the United States, and of the politics of American liberals, including President Joe Biden, who won a wide majority of U.S. Jews' votes. He has said he believes the Pride flag is an anti-Zionist symbol and also equates public criticism of the Israeli government with antisemitism, a position that American Jewish groups have been fastidious about saying they do not hold.

"I have a problem with the trend of Reform Jews seeking to assimilate and affiliate themselves with groups who are anti-Israel," Chikli told the Forward last year.

"The Reform movement has identified itself with the radical left's false accusations that the settlers are violent, so they have earned the criticism against them, and I cannot identify with them," he told the Jerusalem Post, also last year. "They are going back to their roots in Germany of anti-Zionism and anti-nationalism. It's a tragedy that they are going there."

Chikli's appointment comes as Israel inaugurates a right-wing government that includes extremist parties, as well as one minister who has been convicted of inciting violence. The government and its priorities have drawn sharp criticism from Diaspora Jews, including from hundreds of U.S. rabbis who have pledged not to invite any members of extremist coalition blocs to speak to their communities.

Unlike some of his colleagues in the new government, Chikli says he believes there should be a space for egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall, a priority for many Diaspora Jews. He also criticized a haredi

rabbi's condemnation this week of Amir Ohana, a gay ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who is the new Knesset speaker, saying on Twitter, "There is no disease more dangerous than baseless hatred."

But he appears to be on the same page as some of the extremist politicians about the propriety of LGBTQ demonstrations, calling Tel Aviv's Pride Parade a "disgraceful vulgarity" in a Facebook post this summer. (He said he believes sexual identity should be "subdued.") He also shares their disdain of Reform Judaism, a frequent target for some of the Religious Zionist politicians who are part of the governing coalition.

In his new role, Chikli faces the task of winning over American Jewish leaders who may well be skeptical of or dismayed by Israel's rightward shift. With his coalition seeking to narrow the definition of who is considered Jewish, make it harder to move to Israel, and strip rights from minority groups within Israel, including LGBTQ Jews, Israeli Arabs and non-Orthodox Jews, that task could be quixotic.

One area of ideological overlap, though, is in the fight against antisemitism, which watchdogs say is on the rise in the Diaspora.

Israel has gotten more involved in fights over antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the United States in recent years, appointing actress and activist Noa Tishby as its first ever "special envoy for combating antisemitism and delegitimization" last year. Tishby's travels have included visiting the campus of the University of California-Berkeley in the midst of a student anti-Zionist controversy at that school, and making appearances as a talking head on Fox News.

Chikli has indicated that colleges and universities are an area of special interest for him. "I am very worried about what is happening on the campuses," he said in the Jerusalem Post interview. "It is heartbreaking to see Jewish young people who concede their connections to their people and their heritage in order to connect to the latest fashionable movement that they are calling woke."

The Israeli government also involved itself in recent legal negotiations that resulted in regional rights to ice-cream maker Ben & Jerry's being sold to an Israeli company after the Ben & Jerry's U.S. board attempted to halt the sale of its products in "occupied Palestinian territories."

Like U.S. Jewish leaders (and Biden), Chikli vociferously opposes the movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel, known as BDS. He believes that anti-Israel sentiment is inherently antisemitic, issuing a stern warning to American Jews in his Forward interview.

"Don't think that joining anti-Israel movements will help you with anything," he said. "In the end, the folks from the BDS movement will attack you and your children because it's not Israel that they hate, they hate Judaism."

On Wednesday, Chikli accused Yair Lapid, the opposition leader and past prime minister, of being "the spearhead of the BDS movement" because Lapid plans to speak critically to U.S. audiences about the new government.

"What Lapid is doing now as an outgoing prime minister is a disturbing irresponsibility," Chikli said in public comments that he also tweeted. "He does not understand that when he tells the whole world that this is a 'dark' government, the world does not make a separation between government and state. That's exactly how BDS does its work."

Chikli's predecessor, Nachman Shai, met early in his tenure with the heads of the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements in the United States to push the message that Israel would embrace all denominations of Judaism equally.

On the occasion of the new government, Shai recently said that Israel could soon become hostile to Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Exactly how Chikli plans to engage with Diaspora Jews in his role, and when, is not yet clear; he did not respond to a request for an interview on Thursday. But he has started his tenure by taking action

— canceling a 5 million NIS (\$1.4 million) contract with a nonprofit group that Shai had struck shortly after the election. Chikli said the group, which has ties to Israel’s left, was “political” but that he was canceling the contract because it was inappropriate to strike one when the ministry’s leadership was set to change.

Another plan approved shortly before the election also faces an uncertain future: a \$2.3 million contract with the Reform and Conservative movements in the United States to improve Israel’s image among young and liberal American Jews.