

FOOD

Jewish NYers are turning out to support a Druze restaurant that experienced anti-Israel vandalism

By [Julia Gergely](#) February 9, 2024



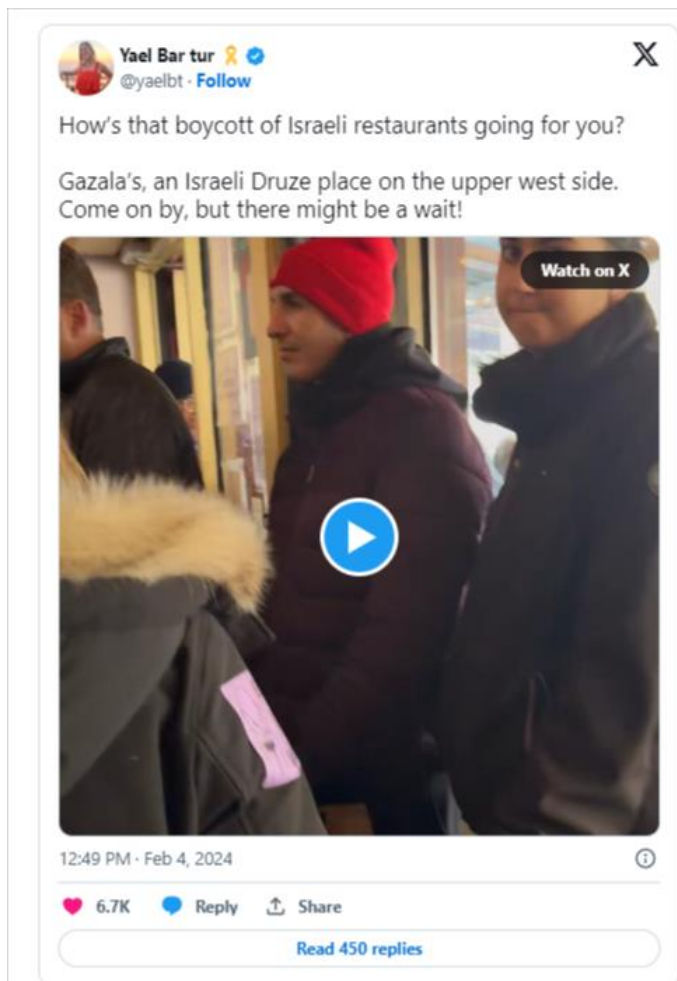
Gazala Halabi is the owner and executive chef of Gazala's, an Israeli-Druze restaurant that was the target of anti-Israel attacks. (Julia Gergely)

([New York Jewish Week](#)) — When Gazala Halabi arrived at her restaurant, Gazala's, last Sunday morning, she wasn't prepared for what would happen later in the day: Hundreds of Jewish and Israeli New Yorkers lined up to dine at her establishment.

In recent months, she told the New York Jewish Week, [her restaurant was broken into twice](#) and was vandalized with “Free Palestine” graffiti, and has been subject to a slew of 1-star reviews on Google and several harassing phone calls. Halabi grew up in Israel as a member of the Druze religious community and serves Middle Eastern staples like hummus, tabbouleh and kebabs.

“It was seriously annoying,” Halabi said of the attacks on her restaurant, similar to those [many Jewish and Israeli establishments have experienced in New York since Israel's war with Hamas](#) began in the wake of the Oct. 7 terrorist attack. “After what happened here, I was down and nervous.”

But when the crowds showed up on Sunday, Halabi said her mood brightened considerably. “I don’t care anymore,” she said about the vandalism, noting that when the restaurant opened at 11 a.m. that day, it was already full.



“By 12 o’clock, God bless, the whole block was filled with people and [Israeli] flags coming to support,” Halabi said. “I’ve never felt as strong as that day.” Nicole Malachi, an Israeli mom of two who lives in Brooklyn, told the New York Jewish Week that she’s been very active in organizing in support of Israel since Oct. 7. When she heard about the vandalism at Gazala’s, she worked with the group Israel Strong NYC to get local Jews to show support for the restaurant.

“She chose not to make her life easy,” Malachi said of Halabi. “She chose to be proud of where she comes from, and there was no way I wasn’t going to support that.”

The Druze community numbers less than 1,000,000 worldwide, with the largest communities residing in Syria, Lebanon and Israel, where they make up approximately 1.6% of the population. The Druze tend to be patriotic members of Israeli society and serve in the Israel Defense Forces; the relationship between Jewish and Druze soldiers is sometimes referred to as [a “covenant of blood.”](#)

“We live in a country and we have to go and protect our country,” Halabi said of the Druze community in Israel. “It doesn’t matter that it’s a Jewish country, it’s my home. They give me the freedom to practice my religion the way I wanted, they give me respect. Should I give them something back? Of course.”

Halabi was in her hometown of Daliyat al-Carmel on Oct. 7 when Hamas attacked Israel. “I was angry and upset and disappointed,” she said.

When Halabi returned to New York a few days later, she immediately hung an Israeli flag and a Druze flag in the center of her restaurant. “It’s not just about showing support,” she said. “Sometimes you don’t want to put politics into your business, but I felt like there’s no way I can do that anymore.”

She also started wearing a necklace with the traditional five-pointed Druze star, as well as a dog tag advocating for the return of the hostages taken into captivity by Hamas that reads “Bring Them Home Now!” Inside the restaurant, the speaker exclusively play Hebrew music.

“After Oct. 7th, I just want the whole world to know I am Israeli,” she said.

When Halabi first arrived in New York in 2001 to join her husband after getting married (she is now divorced) she was intimidated by the pace of big city life. “I came from a village to New York. Most of my time I was bored, I didn’t go out that much. It wasn’t scary — but it is a big city,” she said. “I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.”

What she turned to was cooking — specifically, memories of home. Halabi spent countless hours calling her relatives in Israel and learning to cook their recipes over the phone.

Eventually, Halabi got good enough to start a home-based catering business in 2005, which led to the opening of a brick-and-mortar restaurant two years later. The original location in Hell’s Kitchen closed during the pandemic but the restaurant’s second and now only location moved to its current digs on Amsterdam Ave. in 2018.

She believes Gazala's is the only Druze restaurant in the New York area — and possibly even in the entire United States. While New York is home to a significant expat Israeli community, Halabi said there are almost no members of the Druze community in the city.

“I didn't know what to expect,” she said of her life in New York. “But I think New York has started to be my second home as well.”

Halabi explained that, in Israel, the Druze community feels connected to Jewish Israelis. “We have something in common. That's why we are connected and united,” she said. “The way that Jewish people were minorities and got attacked over time and needed to hide — it is the same with us.”

She added that she's surprised by how that relationship has translated with non-Israeli Jews in New York City. “Every day people are hugging me and thanking me and saying we are standing behind you,” she said.

“They should stop thanking me. For what? It is my country. It's my flag. Even if it's a Jewish country, it's my flag, and I'm proud of it. I'm Israeli. I have to stand with my people. I have to put this Israeli flag up and show support,” Halabi explained. “People come in and thank me like I'm doing them a favor. No, it's you doing me a favor when you come and support me.”

Halabi expressed her gratitude for Sunday's rally, calling her patrons “family” and noting that the participants were not all Israelis. “The people who were here were the Jewish community,” she said. “That shows a lot about the connection and the relationship between the Jews and Druze.”