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ROCKY START

Rep.-elect Chris Rabb's silence on antisemitic protest frustrates Philly's Jewish community

The newly elected congressman's relationship with Philadelphia's Jewish community is starting off on a sour note after many other elected officials inside and outside the state spoke out

By Marc Rod November 9, 2026



Then-state Sen. Chris Rabb takes the stage on May 15, 2026 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

A bicycle protest in Philadelphia last weekend against several Jewish- and Israeli-owned businesses in the heart of Philadelphia set off a wave of condemnations from elected officials across the Keystone State — with some notable exceptions.

Most prominently, Rep.-elect Chris Rabb (D-PA), the Democratic Socialists of America member and state lawmaker who will represent the Philadelphia district where the protest took place, has not issued a statement or responded to numerous requests for comment from *Jewish Insider* throughout the week.

State Sen. Nikil Saval (D-PA), another DSA member who represents the district, had not publicly addressed the situation prior to initial publication of this piece but subsequently condemned it. But Rabb's silence in particular has frustrated and disappointed members of Philadelphia's Jewish community who had hoped for a better start to his relationship with his Jewish constituents, given that he has long been a vocal critic of Israel, and his candidacy raised concerns with members of the Jewish community.

Organizers of the bike rally are planning to repeat the demonstration on upcoming weekends.

Allan Domb, a former city council member and mayoral candidate and the owner of Schlesinger's Deli, one of the restaurants targeted by the protesters, told JI, "I wish [Rabb] had spoken out, I'm not sure why he didn't."

"He's going to be my congressman," Domb continued. "When an owner of a business in his district, who happens to be Jewish, is threatened by a group of people who say they want to shut me down, it seems to me that my congressman should speak up about that."

Others were sharper in their language.

"He's a sack of s***, and that's for the record, and I hope you'll print it," said Shanin Specter, a prominent attorney and son of former Sen. Arlen Specter, who began his career as a Democrat and became a Republican before ending his time in the Senate as a Democrat. "His silence speaks volumes, and it's extremely regrettable that he is going to be representing Philadelphia in the United States Congress."

Specter called Rabb's silence a "declaration of war on the Jewish community in Philadelphia."

David Hyman, an attorney and past president of the American Jewish Committee's Philadelphia Chapter, said that he sees Rabb's lack of comment as a "very conscious" decision.

"He's made a very conscious decision when he ran that he was going to be in a particular lane that was going to make a boogeyman out of AIPAC," he said. "For him to criticize this would have been a bit nuanced and might have muddied a little bit of the brand that he established from day one throughout his campaign. He's not naive. He's a smart guy, and he put together a strategy that worked."

Hyman was supportive of state Sen. Sharif Street, who ran in the Democratic primary against Rabb.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* also highlighted Rabb and Saval's silence — the two did not respond to requests for comment from that publication either — in an editorial published Monday condemning the demonstration and calling for others to do the same.

The Philadelphia DSA, of which both Rabb and Saval are members, condemned the city and state officials who criticized the demonstration, describing their statements as "unacceptable uses of political power, designed to delegitimize and chill acts of solidarity in the fight for Palestinian liberation, weaponized against the very people who helped put these politicians in office."

But Specter said he's still surprised that Rabb didn't speak out.

"I respect the political debate over the issues between Israelis and Palestinians, and he's on a different side of that debate than I am, but that's OK," Specter said. "This was a nakedly antisemitic demonstration. It's the first time in my lifetime that there has been a blatantly antisemitic demonstration In Philadelphia, and every public servant should be speaking out against this. It's not a close call."

"There's no such thing as a Zionist pastrami sandwich — give me a break," he continued.

Specter added that it's "never too late to do the right thing" and that he still hopes Rabb will issue a constructive comment.

Hyman said that he's not surprised at Rabb's silence, but still disappointed. But he also said that he's more concerned about the "more substantive things that will arise in Congress" when Rabb is his representative, saying that he's "sad" about the posture that Rabb seems to be pursuing.

"I think this just reinforces what those of us who've been following this expected," Hyman continued. "Maybe as he evolves from being a candidate to being a congressman, he'll be more serious, deliberate and nuanced in how he sees the complicated issues of the Middle East."

Another Jewish community activist agreed. "For those of us that have been in the middle of this stuff for quite some time, we've known he was going to be on the other side of this and nothing good's going to come of it," they said.

The silence from Saval had also frustrated members of the Jewish community. "Senator Saval has been in touch with constituents about the protest. He believes it was counterproductive and wrong," a spokesperson for Saval told JI on Tuesday.

Specter had called his silence "reprehensible" but said that it is unsurprising given his DSA affiliations.

Hyman had said he was more disappointed in Saval than in Rabb, saying he "would have expected more" from the rising state senator — particularly as Saval and other DSA affiliates appear to be eyeing higher offices in the city in the next election.

The activist added that the silence from figures like Rabb is particularly striking when other left-wing figures, like District Attorney Larry Krasner, spoke out strongly and even attended a solidarity lunch with the targeted restaurants ahead of Sunday's demonstrations.

But the silence from the two local officials isn't overshadowing what local Jewish leaders described as a strong show of support for the targeted businesses from the local Jewish community and communities as far-flung as Washington, D.C., New Jersey, Harrisburg, Pa., and New York.

Community members said that those who showed up to counterprotest and to patronize the restaurants — with lines wrapping around the block — vastly outnumbered the anti-Israel demonstrators.

"Everyone was so supportive. Where else could you wait in line for an hour and a half to two hours and be ecstatic when you finally sat down and wait another hour?" Domb said. "It was heartwarming."

And he expressed his gratitude for all of the elected officials across the state and law enforcement officials who spoke out about the demonstration, showed up in support of the targeted businesses and, in some cases, reached out to him directly to express their support.

He said that the weekend had brought together his family as well — his son flew in from Boston to help out on Sunday, and he reconnected with a distant cousin with whom he hadn't spoken in decades when the cousin recognized the deli's name, drawn from Domb's grandfather.

Domb said that groups of strangers also sat together at larger tables in the restaurant, "and they loved it. It was community dining, and everyone got to meet new people. It was really special."

He offered thanks to the deli's staff as well, who "did an amazing job."

Specter said that the enormous counterdemonstration — something not seen during the various other anti-Israel demonstrations in the center city over the past three years — highlighted how the bike rally was different: "This was nakedly antisemitic."

And he said that the efforts from the organizers of the bike rally to "recast" the event show how it backfired on them.