

UNITED STATES

Elon Musk, in live chat with right-leaning Jews, insists antisemitism isn't a problem on X

Musk also said he didn't need to visit Auschwitz: "I get it."



Elon Musk looks at a business summit at the Chateau de Versailles, outside Paris, May 15, 2023.
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BY ANDREW LAPIN

(JTA) – Elon Musk called himself “aspirationally Jewish,” waffled on a prominent rabbi’s invitation to visit Auschwitz, and insisted that claims of rising antisemitism on his social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, were “absurd.”

The billionaire tech mogul added that antisemitic posts should not be deplatformed, but should instead be met with “counterpoints.” He said that antisemites who aren’t presented with other views online are “just going to be hidden antisemites, and that’s not going to do. That’s perhaps worse.”

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As an example, Musk cited Kanye West, whom he reinstated on X after the rapper’s antisemitic tirade got him banned last year.

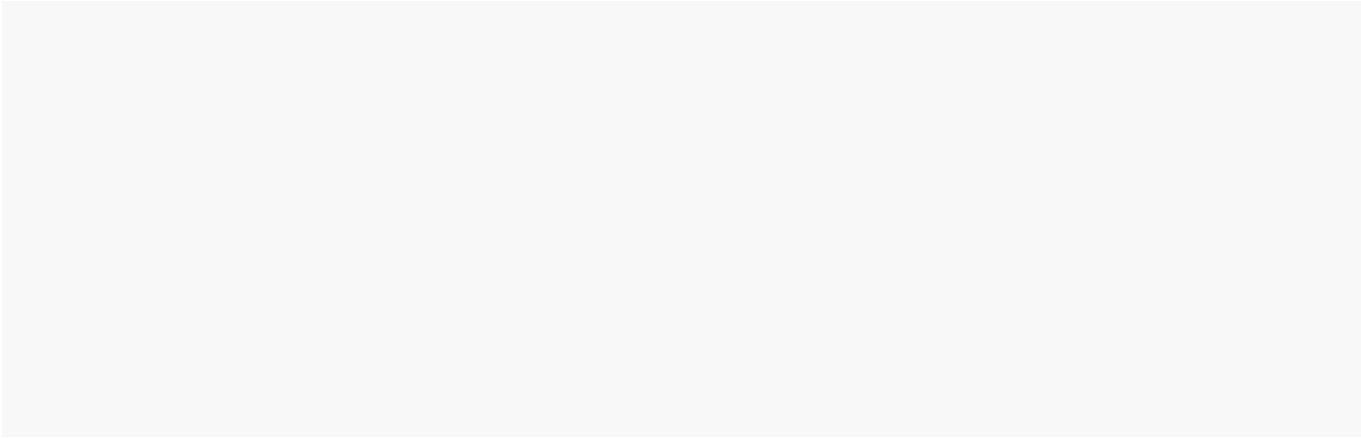
Those statements and more were made during a friendly forum on Thursday featuring Musk and a lineup of Jewish men, most of them avowed conservatives, addressing antisemitism on X under his watch.

Hosted by the politically conservative Orthodox Jewish pundit Ben Shapiro and his publication The Daily Wire, the nearly two-hour chat was titled “X, anti-Semitism, Faith and Free Speech.” It came days after a call from more than 120 Jewish activists, most of them progressive, for advertisers and app stores to drop the platform, and in the wake of a series of attacks from Musk on the Anti-Defamation League. Musk blames an ad boycott spearheaded by the ADL for the site’s revenue loss, and has threatened to sue the antisemitism watchdog for billions of dollars. He has also amplified antisemitic accounts on X that have joined in condemning the group.

Musk has previously denied being antisemitic. On Thursday, he went further, saying, “in some respects I think I am Jewish, basically,” owing to what he said was his large proportion of Jewish friends.

“They use the X platform and I’m like, ‘Do you guys see anything?’ And they’re like, ‘Nope,’” he said.

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He also insisted that “multiple third parties” have verified that hate speech has declined on the platform since his acquisition but did not share what those sources were.

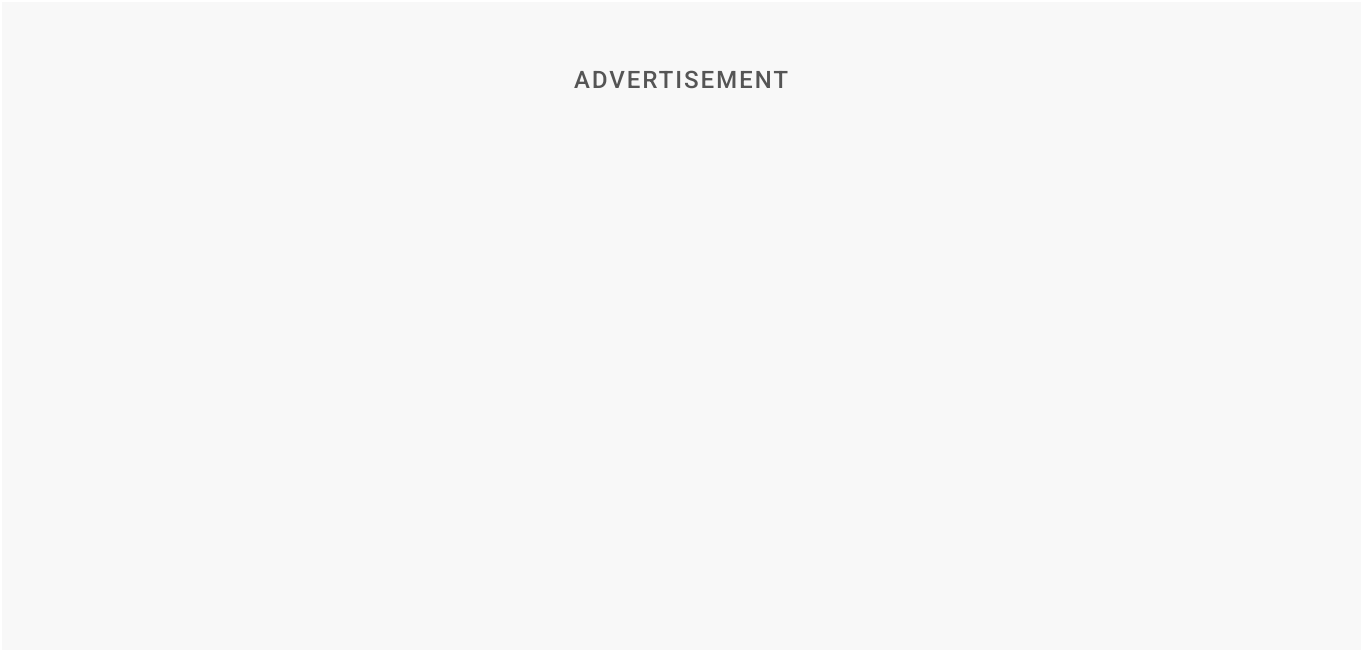
Musk also defended himself from accusations of antisemitism, noting that Walter Isaacson’s recent biography of him hadn’t turned up any evidence of it. “He’s a pretty smart guy,” Musk said of Isaacson. “He might have figured it out if I was antisemitic.”

At another point in the call, Rabbi Menachem Margolin, the Chabad-affiliated chair of the European Jewish Association, asked Musk if he would visit the Auschwitz death camp alongside an upcoming mission of European rabbis.

At first Musk rejected the invite, saying, “I’m very well aware of the Holocaust and Auschwitz and Dachau and whatnot, and all the things that happened that were terrible. So this is not certainly new information for me. So I don’t need to visit Auschwitz to understand. I get it.”

After Margolin pressed the issue, Musk responded, “I will seriously consider it,” before later adding that he could swing by after a visit to a factory he owns in Berlin.

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“Consider it a tentative yes,” he subsequently said. He also apologized for not responding to a petition from Jewish leaders worldwide to push X to endorse the International Holocaust Remembrance Association’s working definition of antisemitism, a widely adopted document that has attracted controversy for defining some forms of Israel criticism as antisemitic. Musk said he hadn’t known about the petition.

At another point, Musk said that one of the main lessons he has taken away from learning about the Nazi era is that “Hitler and the Nazis were extremely censorious. ... The Nazis loved censorship, big time.”

The call provided a small window into how Musk does seek to address hate speech on X. In addition to his comments on deplatforming and “counterpoints,” he framed the question of limiting hate speech as a largely economic one, rather than a moral one. “If we just hammer people with hate, they’re going to leave the platform,” he said. He made a similar statement in a recent live chat with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

He also dodged a question from Shapiro about whether he would demonetize or reduce the reach of accounts that spout antisemitism, although later in the call, he did hint that X might begin experimenting with “freedom of speech, but not reach” — which would mean that X would reduce the visibility of hateful accounts.

Musk also would not commit to a request from former Israeli politician and Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky to limit anti-Zionist speech on the platform, saying, “I think there is some value to not being draconian.”

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The nine Jews on Thursday's call were all male, and mostly on the right-leaning end of the political spectrum. They included former Israeli President Reuven Rivlin; prominent attorney Alan Dershowitz, who represented former President Donald Trump in his first impeachment trial and has also often described himself as a liberal; and Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, who has acted as a rabbi-to-the-stars and once ran for Congress as a Republican.

One woman who had been scheduled to participate, Michal Cotler-Wunsh, Israel's new envoy for combating antisemitism, was not audible when called upon. Moderators attributed her absence, and that of one other participant, to technical difficulties.

Shapiro and other speakers on the call paid Musk a series of compliments on what they said were his positive views of Jewish people and his modeling of Jewish values — including the commandment to have large families. Musk has fathered more than 10 children via his ex-wife, Justine Wilson; his ex-girlfriend, Grimes; and Shivon Zilis, an executive at one of his companies for whom he was a sperm donor. Dershowitz noted that his son is also named Elon.

Boteach even told Musk he could “take credit” for “peace in the Middle East” if Israel and Saudi Arabia reach a normalization agreement, predicting that Musk's electric car company Tesla would reduce the Saudis' oil wealth and push them to come to the diplomatic table.

The participants on the call also agreed with Musk that the ADL shouldn't be the sole voice speaking for Jews. Shapiro challenged the group's reports that hate speech on X has risen since Musk's takeover, saying his own experiences with antisemitism have declined.

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“Of late they’ve become significantly more partisan in their progressive politics, to say the least,” Shapiro said, saying that Musk “happens to be right on the merits here” and calling his threat to sue the group for defamation “pretty funny.”

In response to a comment from another participant, Rabbi Ari Lamm, that the ADL controversy is “a distraction from the conversation serious Jewish people of all backgrounds should be having,” Musk said, “They definitely have impact on advertisers, I’ll tell you that.”

Tt other times Musk displayed a level of comfort with conspiracy theories on his platform, saying, “I think we’re running out of conspiracy theories that didn’t turn out to be true.”

Musk gave himself a positive grade, on the whole, when it came to fighting antisemitism on X.

“Overall I think things are actually pretty good, but I’m not saying they’re perfect. And we want to work to make them better,” he said. He added, “My entire life story is, in fact, pro-Semitic.”

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“I think my values do match that of the Jewish people,” he said at another point. “Knowledge, reading, understanding, debating, these are all Jewish values and I very much

agree with those.”

Musk’s conversation Thursday came less than 24 hours after X’s CEO, Linda Yaccarino, addressed his feud with the ADL at a tech conference in Dana Point, California. According to reports from the conference, Yaccarino noted her own dialogue with ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt, who she said “continues to question the progress as it relates to antisemitism.” She added, “It is disappointing that there is not equal time given to all the progress.”

In a discussion about Musk’s threats to sue the ADL, according to Axios, Yaccarino said, “I wish that would be different. We’re looking into that.” She later added, “Everyone deserves to have the opportunity to speak their opinion, no matter who they are, including Elon.” Shortly afterward, she reportedly left the stage abruptly.

Yoel Roth, Twitter’s former head of trust and safety who was fired after a dispute with Musk over the site’s approach to moderating hate speech, also appeared at the conference. Roth, who is Jewish, said hate speech had gotten worse on the platform under Musk’s ownership.

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