

Two Weddings and a Sorrowful Wife



'M TELLING YOU, one day we will talk about this time as the good old days, as bad as it is."

My friend Michael is sitting across the table from me. We've both flown to London to attend the wedding of a mutual friend who, like us, belongs to the Stockholm Jewish community. The bride and groom are from two European countries and met in a third—a common story among religiously observant European Jews. In order to reach the ultimate goal of having Jewish grandchildren, we have to live each day with our Jewishness on top of mind, fighting to keep up our observance, to find a Jewish partner who shares our same goals, while also staying safe from the underlying threat of harassment and violence.

Michael and I are chatting about the recent attacks on rabbis and other visibly Jewish individuals, swapping stories about what the last few months have been like following the latest Gaza war. We've been through similar dramatic upticks in violence and harassment whenever Israel is involved in a military operation before, but we agree that this time feels worse, leaving us increasingly

angry and isolated. It's not just our anecdotal opinions: Jews across Europe have been experiencing a dramatic surge in antisemitism, usually recast as anti-Zionism, that continues to use the same methods, conspiracy theories, and tropes as previous iterations. Michael tells me things will get worse, that we've reached the point where hating Jews carries no social or political cost and that, for all our complaining, we have lived through the glory days of European Jewry. Now is the time to prepare to leave.



The most recent study of perceptions of antisemitism among European Jews, released in 2018 by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, reports startling numbers, concluding that antisemitism in Europe "pervades everyday life" and is "so common that it becomes normalized." Among more than 16,000 survey respondents, 89 percent felt that antisemitism had increased in their country over the past five years, and 85 percent considered it to be a "very big" or "fairly big" problem in their country, tending to see it as "the biggest social or political problem" where they live. They experienced antisemitism online (89 percent), in public spaces (73 percent), in media (71 percent), and in political life (70 percent). Twenty-eight percent had experienced some form of antisemitic harassment over the past year, and 2 percent had been physically attacked; more than one-third had avoided Jewish events out of safety concerns. Fully 38 percent had considered emigrating at some point during the past five years.

European Jews live in fear and, to some extent, in hiding. They do not trust their governments to protect them. In the 76 years since the Holocaust, hating Jews has again become politically expedient and socially acceptable in Europe. A clear line has been drawn: The dead Jews of the past are good, while those who insist on staying alive and staying Jewish—especially those who support the State of Israel—are evil.

In Europe, therefore, Jewish observance is an act of rebellion.

We Jews bond together like refuseniks, fighting for survival in a place that has never stopped trying to get rid of us. Governments across Europe are attempting—and sometimes succeeding—to ban foundational Jewish practices such as kosher slaughter and male circumcision, making traditional Jewish life extremely difficult. Jews attending prayers, Jewish schools, or community centers do so behind bulletproof glass with armed guards at the door. When they are victims of antisemitic attacks, they are often assumed to have provoked the attackers simply by being Jews.

Although modern-day Jew-hatred is more refined than in the past, current conditions are eerily similar to those in Europe hundreds of years ago, when Jews were given the choice between death and hiding, whether in the form of forced conversion or the self-erasure of our ancestry, practices, and beliefs. If we are too Jewish, we can expect to be attacked; but if we tone down our identity and assimilate, we will be left alone.

While antisemitism used to come primarily from the far Right, it now attacks from all angles. Respondents to the EU study reported a “wide range of perpetrators, which spans the entire social and political spectrum.” The most serious incidents of antisemitic harassment they encountered came from extremist Muslims (30 percent), from people on the Left (21 percent), and from those on the Right (13 percent).

Given these pressures, European Jews have increasingly abandoned their old homes for the old/new country: Israel is the one place on earth where it is safe to be breathing while Jewish. The pandemic has only pushed the issue of aliyah to the front of our collective mind. The closing of borders gave us the first taste of what it’s like to live in a world where Israel is not an option.

With the Jewish population of Europe feeling as if it’s on its way to an eventual extinction, we have to wonder whether our absence will be felt—and whether it matters. The answer, simply and clearly, is that we were never wanted in the first place and that our contribution to and success within European society is at the very heart of Europe’s

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disdain for us. The Jews of Europe have been hated and persecuted for over 2,000 years, because of our unique ability to survive and thrive in forced exile and our tradition of neither proselytizing nor intermarrying. The ironic duality of antisemitism is never more evident than in Europe; they do not want us to be one of them, but they resent us for refusing to assimilate. Our unwillingness to substitute our millennia of identity, faith, and tradition for modern-day dogma is, to European society, proof of nefariousness, all too often punishable by death.

We will be missed—not as citizens, but as enemies. Were Europe to become *Judenrein*, the continent would be without a handy scapegoat for its ever-growing problems, and that could trigger a crisis. The relationship between Europe and its Jews is not unlike that of an abusive marriage: The abused wife is only ever loved and cherished in weakness, and she is beaten—even killed—when asserting her freedom and identity. As conditions worsen, it is becoming more and more difficult for Jews to justify remaining Europe’s sorrowful wife.

I find myself at another wedding, just a few weeks later, this time in Accra, Ghana. The bride and groom met in Africa, their families are

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from Europe, their passports are Israeli, and now they are about to start a new life and family in West Africa.

They are like all of us, a wild mix of backgrounds. When we introduce ourselves, we do so by telling one another all the places our ancestors were chased out of: Latvia, Russia, Germany, Spain, Uzbekistan, Poland, Hungary, Romania. Few of us at the ceremony are refugees ourselves, but we are all born with the readiness to leave, carrying our passports the way others might bring umbrellas, as a hedge in case of rain. This is the darkness ever present to us, just as a groom breaks the glass under the chuppah in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple. It is the plague of our existence, but it is also the key to our survival. It is the reason why, as a people, we outlive our persecutors, despite repeated predictions of our demise.

Constantly fighting for your identity means constantly affirming your identity — something Europe hasn't done in a very long time. Jews inhabit all the things that Europe lacks: faith, identity, tradition, nationalism, and survival. In a different world, Europe might have taken a page from our ancient book to ensure its own survival.

I've written about the Jews of Europe many times, and all of my articles have been calls to action, cries for help, expressions of fury. This time is different. Now I also feel sadness, not for myself, but for the Europe I grew up in, the place I used to love.

I have deep roots in Sweden, my country of birth, going back three generations. I have grown up dipping my toes in cold and placid fjords and in the warm and choppy Mediterranean. I had great pride in being this mix of things and places, languages and traditions, and as a child I assumed I could belong to all these entities at once, passport from one place and heart in another. Today, I know differently. Today I am forced to make a choice between the country of my birth and the land of my ancestors, because Europe does not allow me to have both — not if I want to stand up straight as a Jew of faith, a Zionist, a daughter of Abraham.

In America, people carry the duality I seek: They call themselves Jewish-American, Muslim-American, Sikh-American. The very names express a built-in acceptance. But in Europe, we must make a choice, or the choice will be made for us.

So I choose to be a Jew. A Jew born in Sweden, but a Jew first. I truly believe it is Europe's loss that it forces us to make these choices, pushing us into this binary place. The rampant antisemitism in Europe encourages some Jews to assimilate, but it also makes many of us more observant, less susceptible to pressure, prouder of who we are. It pushes us closer to the safety of one another, further away from the non-Jewish world and its constant threats. Had there been some public goodwill, Europe could have seen a strong and faithful Jewish population as essential to Europe's own moral and political health. But Europe could never fully get past its age-old hatred of Jews, much less resolve its modern-day ambivalence toward them, to see the point clearly.

The lesson of Europe will be written over and over in years and decades to come, but in essence it is simple: You cannot build a nation without faith, and you cannot keep it alive without tradition. Somewhere along the line, in the aftermath of World War II, Europe decided that religion, nation-states, and particularist identities were the enemy of peace. As Jews, we are remnants of the old, the almost forgotten parts of Europe, so it makes sense that we would be treated as enemies of the state. Yet as Europe's social, economic, and

political crises become more acute, it will need the kind of social cohesion that only a concept of peoplehood can provide. Too bad for Europe that the people who best embody and model that concept will by then have mostly left.



In one week, I've attended two Jewish weddings, lit Shabbat candles, heard the ritual kiddush prayer, and attended synagogue services. In just one week, I have filled my life with ancient practices that affirm my faith, my traditions, and my sense of peoplehood. I have seen new unions formed, young men and women vowing to build faithful Jewish homes. We Jews have been called an ever-dying people—ever dying, ever living, generation after generation. If I weep, I do not weep for the Jews of Europe, I weep for Europe itself, for the paradise of my childhood, which now for all intents and purposes is lost.

I am no longer advocating that Europe accept or protect us. After the events of the past few years, I know there is no point, but for once it is Europe I pity, not us. The Jews will be okay—for all the reasons Europe hates us, we will be okay. For all those same reasons, Europe most likely will not. *