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Between Charlottesville and Jerusalem

IS SUMMERS AGO, Americans watched in horror as hundreds of white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched through Charlottesville, Va., at the Unite the Right rally. Torch-bearing marchers wore swastikas, chanted racist and antisemitic slogans such as "white lives matter" and "Jews will not replace us," and terrorized black neighborhoods, the University of Virginia, the small downtown core, and the local synagogue. As activists gathered to counter their taunts and threats, one Unite the Right protester intentionally drove his car into the crowd, causing severe injuries to counter-protesters and the death of 32-year-old Heather Heyer. Images of the march rocketed around the world, and for a fleeting moment, the horror these images evoked

felt almost universal. Although the ideas behind the march were given many names — ascendant fascism, racism, white supremacy, neo-Nazism, antisemitism — there was widespread acknowledgment among observers that it was abhorrent. The event signified a new era of violent antisemitism and Jewish vulnerability in America.

The sentiments behind the march, and the feelings it evoked in Jews in Charlottesville and around the country, are familiar to Jews in Israel. In the most recent example, in May 2023, a new but familiar installment in the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians broke out, as rocket attacks from Gaza and Israel's military response, Operation Shield and Arrow, led to more armed conflict and death in the Middle East. This triggered the usual critiques of Israel's behavior, ranging from reasonable debates about geopolitics, national security, and human rights to irrational calls for Israel's eradication and the demonization of Jews and Zionism.

The events in Charlottesville and Israel may appear to be wholly unrelated, having played out with different parties on opposite sides of the world. But they reflect the same story: the challenges faced by today's Jews in navigating both their power and their vulnerability amid contemporary manifestations of antisemitism. We fail to recognize this throughline at our peril.

Much seems to divide American and Israeli Jews today. Polls show an increasing desire among American Jews, particularly those farther to the Left, to dissociate themselves from Israel and Zionism. Increasing numbers of young American Jews disavow any connection to Israel, while Israelis are ever more apt to write off the need for American Jewish support. Yet the two communities share more than they realize, including the ways in which they are perceived by others. This understanding came into sharp relief for us as we watched the civil trial of the Charlottesville protesters unfold in the winter of 2021.

What we found revealing about this trial — which occurred so

far off the public radar that even some locals ignored it — is the looking glass it offered for American and Israeli Jews. The lawsuit, which eventually found white supremacists and neo-Nazis liable for millions of dollars in damages, highlights the double bind facing both communities today: While Jews in America and Israel are undeniably successful and powerful, they are simultaneously threatened — and even at risk of existential demise.

Within days of the Charlottesville march, two narratives emerged to explain what had happened. One held that the events were about racism and white nationalism in a town that held itself out as progressive but still benefited from the vestiges of school segregation, racialized policing, and redlining. The other had less to do with Confederate statues and the shadow of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and more to do with antisemitism and continuing efforts to terrorize Jews.

Facing federal inaction, a group of plaintiffs filed a civil rights lawsuit. Their aim was to bankrupt the organizations that had planned the protest. They also hoped to use civil discovery to unearth the funding sources and interconnections among groups such as the Proud Boys, the Ku Klux Klan, and Identity Evropa. The nine plaintiffs were members of the Charlottesville community who were targeted and injured during the rally; several were people of color, but none were Jewish. (One Jewish plaintiff had been dismissed at an earlier stage of the litigation.) The lawyers who represented them, however, were almost all Jewish, and their Jewish identity was a key element in their choice to pursue the case and to ensure that it addressed *both* antisemitism and racism. This was also a primary motivation for Integrity First for America, an NGO established to support the lawsuits, which raised most of its fund-

ing from Jewish communities and philanthropists. Even before the trial began, then, the dual experiences of American Jews were clear: Antisemitic threats to the Jewish community would be countered by the power of Jewish lawyers and funders, from the heights that Jews had reached in America and in its justice system — and that power would be used to attack American racism as well.

Twelve federal jurors in Charlottesville sat through the four-week trial of *Sines v. Kessler*, hearing testimony from 36 witnesses and sifting through five terabytes of digital evidence. The case pulled threads from both narratives about the march, arguing that it echoed — and perpetuated — not only centuries of anti-black terrorism in the American South but also the history of pogroms and massacres of Jews.

A key moment was the expert witness report of Deborah Lipstadt, a renowned historian of the Holocaust who would soon become the U.S. special envoy for combating antisemitism. Lipstadt argued that the words and deeds of the protesters "fit comfortably within a long tradition of antisemitism and share in the tradition that led to the violent murder of millions of Jews in the Holocaust." She explained the differences between racism and antisemitism: Racism is a form of "punching down," a prejudice built on a perception of superiority over a racial group, while antisemitism is a form of "punching up," a prejudice built on a perception of being victimized by a manipulative, powerful group. The "great replacement" theory championed by the protestors, she noted, deftly merges the two, imagining rich Jews as puppet masters, orchestrating a conspiracy to replace the white, Christian hegemony with minority populations, including blacks, Muslims, and people of color. In this theory, the Jews are double victimizers, manipulating their inferior racialized puppets in service of destroying white America.

The jury found the organizers of the Unite the Right rally jointly and severally liable under Virginia's civil rights laws for injuries inflicted on

the plaintiffs. The 24 defendants and organizations had engaged in a conspiracy to incite racially motivated violence. The 11 plaintiffs were awarded more than $26 million in damages, including $24 million in punitive damages. (In late 2022, the punitive damages were reduced by a federal judge to $350,000, because of a Virginia statute. The $2 million in compensatory awards was unaffected.)

For many, the verdict was an unalloyed success. Journalists wrote of a "historic victory." Yet for us, the trial and the resulting coverage create a more complex understanding of the American Jewish experience — one that enables Jews to use their power to fight contemporary antisemitism and racism, acknowledges their vulnerability in the face of antisemitism, and accepts that many Jews have also benefited from the racist structures of the American past.

The Unite the Right rally was clearly part of the centuries-old story of race-based violence in the American South and — with its Nazi iconography and the targeting of the town's historic synagogue — also another link in the chain of antisemitism. Yet while the alt-Right is sufficiently capacious in its ability to hate blacks and Jews simultaneously, too many other observers require a neat answer as to whether the Charlottesville march was ultimately meant to inspire a race war *or* an anti-Jewish pogrom. The stories of blacks and Jews in America are often perceived as separate and distinct narratives: To focus primarily or even exclusively on the protesters' racism would appear to deny the antisemitism also present at the rally and experienced, increasingly, by Jews in America every day. (ADL reports a 36 percent increase from 2021 to 2022 in antisemitic incidents in the United States, part of a global trend.) On the other hand, spotlighting antisemitism runs the risk of diminishing the racist elements

of the white ethno-nationalist movement and eliding the heights to which Jews have climbed in the American power structure.

Grassroots consciousness of institutional discrimination and violence toward blacks has been growing in recent years among mainstream progressive Americans, following cases of police brutality. Many American Jews have proudly played a part in this reckoning, harking back to the central role played by Jewish activists during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Yet because the Jewish story in America today is largely one of success, wealth, and political power, it challenges the possibility of black-Jewish collaboration, as some black activists see Jews as part of the white oppressor class.

But the Jewish-American story is also one of vulnerability and a growing sense of concern and danger. Where, then, are Jews situated in the events in Charlottesville? Are they part of a privileged, white America, bearing partial responsibility for generations of racial discrimination and violence, and obliged to step aside and allow public attention to focus on others? Or are Jews a vulnerable minority in these events, watching history repeat itself, and obligated to safeguard its members from persecution and harm?

The answer is both.

This complicated issue of simultaneous power and vulnerability also lies at the heart of much of the world's conception of contemporary Israel. Noting this similarity can help bridge the growing rift between the world's two major Jewish communities.

The experiences of Israeli and American Jews are different in important ways: Israelis live in a sovereign Jewish state where they are a majority; American Jews live in a multicultural society where they are a small minority. Although some critics draw parallels

between American institutionalized racism and the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, or between Israeli "colonialism" and American enslavement, we side with writers such as Matti Friedman and Einat Wilf who argue that these are inaccurate, sloppy transpositions of American conflicts onto Israel. The two communities are unique. Nevertheless, they share a fundamental similarity: Both are remarkably powerful and uniquely vulnerable.

The Jewish state has long been a symbol of power. It is seen by many of its citizens as an island of sanity and prosperity, fighting for its life in a violent, hostile Middle East. Its military is one of the strongest in the world, and it has succeeded repeatedly, often against all odds, in holding off its enemies. In reviving an ancient Hebrew culture and furthering innovation and technology, Israeli Jews have developed a fierce national identity and built a strong economy. As we write this, hundreds of thousands of Israelis continue to march in the streets each week to protest the current government's proposed judicial overhaul, demonstrating the strength of Israel's civil society and democratic culture.

And yet one cannot separate Israelis' perception of their strength from their sense of fear. Israel faces multiple enemies at its borders and experiences a fragile internal sense of security because of the ever-present threat of violence. Israeli Jews live in constant awareness of being under attack and being a hated minority in an Arab Middle East. They build protected spaces against rockets in their apartments and institutions and take cover at the sound of a motorcycle backfiring. Israeli Jews also live with the specter of ancient Jewish history, where internal strife and infighting have ended previous experiments in Jewish sovereignty.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank is ultimately a testament to feelings of both power and vulnerability. The occupation is sustained by a powerful force that is currently used to discriminate against and

oppress Palestinians. Yet for most Israelis it is justified by an existential fear. In ways that are rarely captured in news accounts, Israelis are terrified of violence, even while they exert it themselves. How to navigate this volatile seam? What does it mean, ethically and in practice, to be powerful and vulnerable at the same time?

For centuries, the Jewish narrative was solely one of vulnerability and victimhood — what Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called "the experience of shared suffering." The flourishing of the Jewish state and the thriving of North American Jewry, however, seem to indicate the transformation of the Jewish story into one of extraordinary power. The ethical challenge for us all is to figure out how to absorb the truth that both can simultaneously be true: We must negotiate between power and vulnerability not simply for the sake of our Jewish communities but also to offer a countercultural model of complexity in a world that prefers simplistic stories and radical extremes. To make the choice to live *inside* the tensions inherent in being both powerful and vulnerable opens up possibilities for moving forward in a new spirit.

What if, instead of embracing absolute versions of one or the other narrative, we could acknowledge that we often seize on extreme stories for transactional purposes?

What if we stopped minimizing the vulnerability and pain of other communities, whether black Americans or Palestinians, and rejected the zero-sum calculation whereby acknowledging another community's pain seems to undermine our own? Remembering that Jewish merchants in Charlottesville benefited from historical redlining and other efforts to stymie black progress does not diminish Jews' suffering from antisemitism, including in the Charlottesville protests. Mourning innocent children killed in an Israeli military operation in Gaza does not negate Israel's need and responsibility to defend itself, nor does it deny Israelis' fear and sense of helplessness when they are under attack.

Reckoning with the suffering of other marginalized groups in no way reduces the real and growing fear of anti-Jewish hate and violence. Narratives that posit antisemitism as a uniquely dangerous form of hate, and that fail to connect it to other hatreds, increasingly fall on deaf ears, particularly among those who are not Jewish. American and Israeli Jews cannot begin to explore what it means to be an ally to other vulnerable communities, or what it means to continue organizing and increasing power either as a minority community or as a sovereign state, until we have a coherent theory that grapples with our considerable power as well as our continued vulnerability. Such a theory would allow us to talk boldly and publicly through a moral lens that acknowledges multiple forms of suffering while reflecting reality more coherently.

To step into this gap might put decades of Jewish narrative on trial, in a sense, with an eye toward abandoning the story of unique suffering and unparalleled greatness. We believe that a less parochial and self-interested narrative, one in which we accept that we are both powerful and afraid, would be better received at this moment. At a minimum, it would change our relationships with other powerless groups, and even with other powerful ones.

Jews have always been experts at navigating complexities, balancing our responsibilities to protect ourselves while also helping others. This is the time to model such nuance, explicitly and loudly. Refusing to inhabit one narrative or the other, but embracing the tension between them, will strengthen our communities and transform our ability to stand up proudly for ourselves and others. ✴