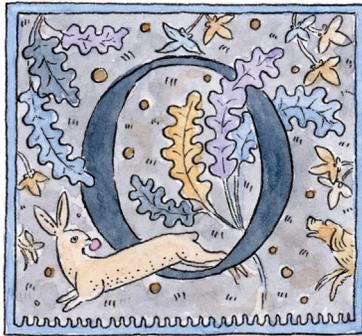


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It Is Still October 7

Jews face monumental challenges around the world. Our biggest crisis might be here in the United States



CTOBER 7, 2023 forever changed Jewish history. The cataclysm is so profound that it will take years to fully understand. Time froze. It is still October 7. We have not yet moved on. Our anguish is too raw, our fear and uncertainty too pervasive. We are still traumatized, unable to truly begin

the healing process until the most intense fighting ceases and the danger is lifted. Commissions of inquiry have yet to be established, but they will be, and the political and military reckoning is sure to come. It will be a deeply painful process, but there can be no healing without painstaking investigation and genuine accountability. These will roil Israelis as well as world Jewry, including American Jews.

What are the most immediate and urgent challenges we face?

Zionism

Among the most consequential of the many gifts that Zionism bestowed upon the Jewish people is the gift of the spirit. The State of Israel embodies the indomitable will of the Jewish people to survive and prosper. Zionism represents hope, a testament to the remarkable resilience and dogged determination of the Jews: Pick yourself up from the valley of despair, dust yourself off, and walk again. The Zionist ethos awakened a can-do spirit in our people. We jolted ourselves out of nearly 2,000 years of national passivity, actively participating in our own — and humanity's — destiny. Self-determination restored our confidence and pride. In the course of building this miracle of a country, the Jewish people themselves were rebuilt.

The founders and early activists of the Zionist movement never promised to eliminate Jew-hatred. To the contrary, they thought it was an incurable disease. It was their Jewish ideological opponents who believed that antisemitism could be eradicated through the full embrace of the Enlightenment. While no one could have predicted the dimensions of the Holocaust, in retrospect it proved that the Zionists were more right than their critics in contending that the Age of Reason could not cure antisemitism because hatred of Jews is not grounded in reason and is therefore ineradicable. Zionists concluded that the best response to such hatred was to create a state of our own, where we would not depend on the inflated promises of European nations to protect Jews.

At the center of the Zionist ethos stands this resolve: We will defend ourselves by ourselves. Never again would Jews be powerless prey to marauding murderers. The State of Israel would guarantee Jewish security and dignity.

October 7 shattered our faith in this, Zionism's most basic commitment. Hundreds were massacred, brutalized, tortured, abused, and kidnapped, while the state itself was largely absent. Two hundred thousand Israelis became homeless in their national home. One shudders to contemplate the dimensions of the catastrophe had Hezbollah also invaded from the north on that Simchat Torah day.

Most ominously, October 7 thrust us back into a pre-1948 mindset of exile that Zionism had supposedly transcended. This explains why most Israelis believe they are in an existential struggle, as elemental as the fight for independence. This war is not a territorial dispute. It is not about settlements. Most Israelis now believe that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict never really was about either of these. Rather, it is a war of survival: Hamas or us, Iran and its proxies or us. It is a war to restore faith in the Zionist enterprise itself.

Antisemitism

October 7 also exposed the persistence of Jew-hatred constantly bubbling under the surface of Western societies, including America.

It is not that we were oblivious to the still-existing hostility toward Jews. We remember the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre well. The chants from Charlottesville, “Jews will not replace us,” are still fresh. But in terms of our daily routines, most American Jews related to Jew-hatred as we all tend to relate to our own mortality: We know it is inevitable, but we convince ourselves that, somehow, it will not happen to us.

One of the saddest developments since October 7 is the shock experienced by American Jews who are encountering pervasive antisemitism for the first time in their universities and schools, at work, on social media, in threats to their synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions, and on the streets of their hometowns.

The realization that age-old hatreds are still alive and kicking, even here — especially here — has plunged our community into a crisis of confidence in American exceptionalism. We are beginning to hear echoes of Europe, the howls of hatred that brought our ancestors to these shores in the first place.

The nexus between anti-Zionism and antisemitism is now much clearer to many of those who were blind or naïve. Leave aside the intellectual debate about whether anti-Zionism, by definition, constitutes antisemitism: The effect, if not the intent, of anti-Zionism is to generate intense hostility to Judaism and Jews themselves. We have now seen with our own eyes how easily the words “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” transform into “gas the Jews,” “kill the Jews,” “cleanse the world of Jews.” How naturally hatred of Israel mutates into hatred of Jews. How easily anti-Israel passions lead to violence against Jews and Jewish institutions.

Western Liberalism

For years now, some of us on the Left have been warning of the deteriorating commitment of our side to liberalism. Too many were unwilling or unable to see or acknowledge this through the camouflage of such high-sounding words “liberation,” “progress,” “civil and human rights,” “antiracism,” and “anti-colonialism.” October 7 cleared away these pretenses and exposed the moral rot growing within the central institutions of American liberalism.

No matter what atrocities the Palestinian national movement commits, it is American and Western progressives more than conservatives who hem and haw and find ways to justify terrorism. Universities, elite public and private schools, feminist and human-rights organizations, and far too many more institutions allegedly devoted to justice, truth, and freedom failed to muster

the basic human compassion to empathize with the victims of Hamas, let alone to condemn the perpetrators, even before Israel responded militarily. Longtime interfaith colleagues who showered us with support after the Pittsburgh massacre — our friends with whom we initiated many communal projects for peace, tolerance, and religious understanding — were silent. Not only did many progressives avoid condemning Hamas, they considered the massacres legitimate resistance to a supposedly genocidal settler-colonial state that needed to be eliminated. As one speaker emphasized at an Oakland city-council debate: “It is a contradiction to be pro-humanity and pro-Israel.”

The liberal community that I represent — with which the majority of American Jews identify — is disheartened, disillusioned, and disoriented. What has happened to the decades-long partnership with our allies and ideological soulmates? Jews helped build America’s great universities. How could they be indifferent, at best, to our pain? We devoted ourselves to civil liberties and human dignity, helping to create and populate some of America’s preeminent civil rights organizations. Where are their condemnations of the most grotesque violations of human rights most of us have ever encountered? We have marched arm in arm with the black community in pursuance of racial justice since the 1960s. How did the moral clarity expressed by Martin Luther King Jr. — who insisted that “Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state in security is incontestable” and who, according to the late Representative John Lewis, once chastised an anti-Zionist student, saying, “When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You’re talking anti-Semitism” — collapse into glorification of Hamas paragliders by some Black Lives Matter activists?

What business do progressives have defending those who oppress women, gays, minorities, and Christians? How could feminist organizations not condemn horrific sexual violence against Israeli women?

How to explain that the very people who insist that women should always be believed when reporting sexual assaults now demand proof from Israelis and refuse to accept the starkest evidence in front of their eyes? What to make of climate activists taking time out of their day and money out of their coffers to oppose Israel, as if there is some insidious intersectional interplay between the supposed evils of the Jewish state and the perils of climate change?

Why no outcry against the sinister use by Hamas of human shields, or against the conversion of hospitals, schools, mosques, and playgrounds into terrorist bases? Why do young adults, especially, who are so acutely sensitive to the assignment of moral accountability, fail to assign moral agency to Palestinians? Why treat Palestinians as passive victims who have no political or moral responsibility for their actions?

There is an expanding and deepening realization within the liberal Jewish community that this type of progressivism is a threat to the well-being of American Jews and to Western civilization itself. It is not progressive; it is regressive. It is not liberalism; it is a betrayal of liberalism.

The Virtues of Moderation

October 7 should inspire us to rediscover, and recommit to, the virtues of moderation. Whenever extremism has gained the upper hand in our community, it has inevitably caused destruction. The rabbis knew all about our propensity toward extremism and warned against it. The ancient Jewish state was destroyed by internal hatred, said Talmudic sages. “We are commanded,” Maimonides taught, “to walk in the middle ways, which are the good and right ways. As it is said: ‘And you shall walk in His ways’” (Hilchot De’ot 1:5).

I assume that future Israeli commissions of inquiry will investi-

gate in minute detail the monumental strategic, operational, and political failures of October 7. But what seems clear to me already at this preliminary stage is that part of what went wrong was the unprecedented political empowerment of hyper-nationalists and religious fundamentalists in the months before the attacks. Of all the grave transgressions that Prime Minister Netanyahu has committed, among the most egregious is the normalization of forces in Jewish political life that should never be granted such access to power. Predictably, within weeks of the formation of the current government, ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious elements polarized the country, with the support and encouragement of Netanyahu.

How disastrous to have dragged Israel and the Jewish world into an all-out battle over something called “judicial reform,” which more than half of Israel believed was judicial castration. The rage this government fomented; the social turmoil, economic uncertainty, and turbulence in the ranks of the IDF; the unwillingness or inability to listen to the pain of the other—all of this created a catastrophic rupture of Israeli society that we now know was a factor in convincing Hamas to strike at just that moment, when the country was riven and distracted. The most senior officials in Israel’s defense establishment warned day and night that Israel’s deterrence and battle readiness were deteriorating. The government ignored them.

We must now do everything in our power to marginalize Israel’s extremists and recommit to the virtues of moderation. If we do not, the modern State of Israel risks going the way of its two ancient predecessors, both of which disintegrated in their eighth decade. This task is, primarily, for Israeli citizens, but American Jews can help. Victor Hugo wrote: “To be ultra is to go beyond. . . . It is to be a partisan of things to the point of becoming their enemy.” An ultra-nationalist Zionism that abandons Judaism’s humanitarian, tolerant, peace-seeking, pluralistic, and democratic foundations will destroy

Zionism, weakening the loyalty of Israeli citizens, not to mention the Jews of Western democracies.

In America, the aftermath of October 7 has exposed the growing challenges we face in preventing the fracturing of our own community. While small pockets of ultra-Orthodox Jews always opposed Zionism for theological reasons, the current amount of enmity toward Israel from within Jewish communities is unprecedented.

In December 2023, more than 1,000 current members and alumni of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), mostly young, signed a letter to the movement's leadership demanding that the URJ support an immediate cease-fire. Aside from a passing reference to Hamas's atrocities (in a sentence grieving for Palestinian victims of Israel's counter-attack), the letter warned of the "grave risk of genocide" in Gaza.

It is appropriate—even necessary—to mourn the loss of life, dislocation, and misery of Palestinian civilians (notwithstanding the widespread underestimation of their support for and collaboration with Hamas). Judaism does not rejoice in or glorify the deaths even of our enemies, let alone noncombatants. We are torn apart by human suffering, even if inflicted in a just war. Jewish tradition portrays God admonishing the angels on high who uttered songs of praise upon the destruction of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea: "My children are drowning in the sea and you sing songs before me?!" (BT Megillah, 10b).

It goes without saying that it is entirely legitimate to debate whether and when a cease-fire should come into effect. But the most revealing part of the letter was the signatories' explanations as to why they signed it. Over and over again, they mentioned the URJ's complicity in "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," "the oppression of the Palestinian people," and Israeli "apartheid" and "colonialism." They expressed no doubt, no complexity, no qualms. Their righteousness was self-evident to them, as was the moral culpability of those who disagreed. They

accused the Reform movement of violating the principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) that we, their rabbis and educators, had taught them in our synagogues, schools, youth groups, and camps.

With ice in their hearts, they expressed no Jewish warmth, nary a word of sympathy for Israelis or compassion for the murdered, brutalized, sexually assaulted, and kidnapped of our own people. There was no gratitude or grief for Israeli soldiers their age, who put aside everything to protect the people of Israel, sacrificing even their lives. It is as if all Jewish solidarity, empathy, responsibility, and mutuality have been stripped from these young Jews. According to them, it is we Reform rabbis and educators who taught them these values.

We are reaping what we have sowed.

We have distorted and mistaught the meaning of *tikkun olam*. In our enthusiasm to convey Judaism's universal obligations, we neglected to emphasize that Judaism starts with the covenant of the Jewish people. All Jews are responsible for one another. When one Jew feels pain, all suffer. The uniqueness of Judaism and the source of its moral power lie in our commitment to the Jewish family and to all the families of the earth at one and the same time. *Ahavat ha'briyot*—love of humankind—is balanced with *ahavat Yisrael*—love for the Jewish people. It is not one or the other. It is both.

We have also distorted and mistaught our prophetic tradition. All the Hebrew prophets that anti-Zionist Jews are so fond of quoting were of the Jewish people, by the Jewish people, and for the Jewish people. If any of those prophets were alive today, they would be appalled by the use of their names to promote anti-Zionism.

I am, of course, in favor of vigorous debate. In one way or another, all of us are critics of Israeli governments. But the anti-Zionism of increasing numbers of young American Jews disheartens me. Their ignorance of history is breathtaking, as is their shocking callousness to the dangers of Islamism. The tone and tenor of their earnest

pontification is a form of privilege. Where you stand, the saying goes, often depends on where you sit. It is much easier to preach to Israelis how they should deal with terrorists when you do so from the safety of an American university quad rather than from the kibbutz a mile from Gaza. Don't these young people know what would happen to the nearly 7 million Jews of Israel if the "from the river to the sea" crowd succeeded? Don't they think at all about what might happen to themselves and the other millions of Jews around the world if, indeed, Islamists "globalize the intifada"?

We know the answer. "There will be a second, a third, a fourth [attack]...until Israel is annihilated," as a Hamas official Ghazi Hamad helpfully explained.

I am very worried about the future of our youth. In the end, our debates in America are less about the Jewish state than the state of American Jews. Israel's future will be forged with or without anti-Zionist American Jews; it is American Jews who need Israel. To sever ourselves from our own people is to sever ourselves from Judaism. The will to Jewish distinctiveness ensures Jewish distinctiveness. The will to continue leads to continuity. There is a ferocity to Jewish survival instincts, a mighty and majestic sense of Jewish destiny.

When these are lost, the future is lost. *