

S A P I R

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

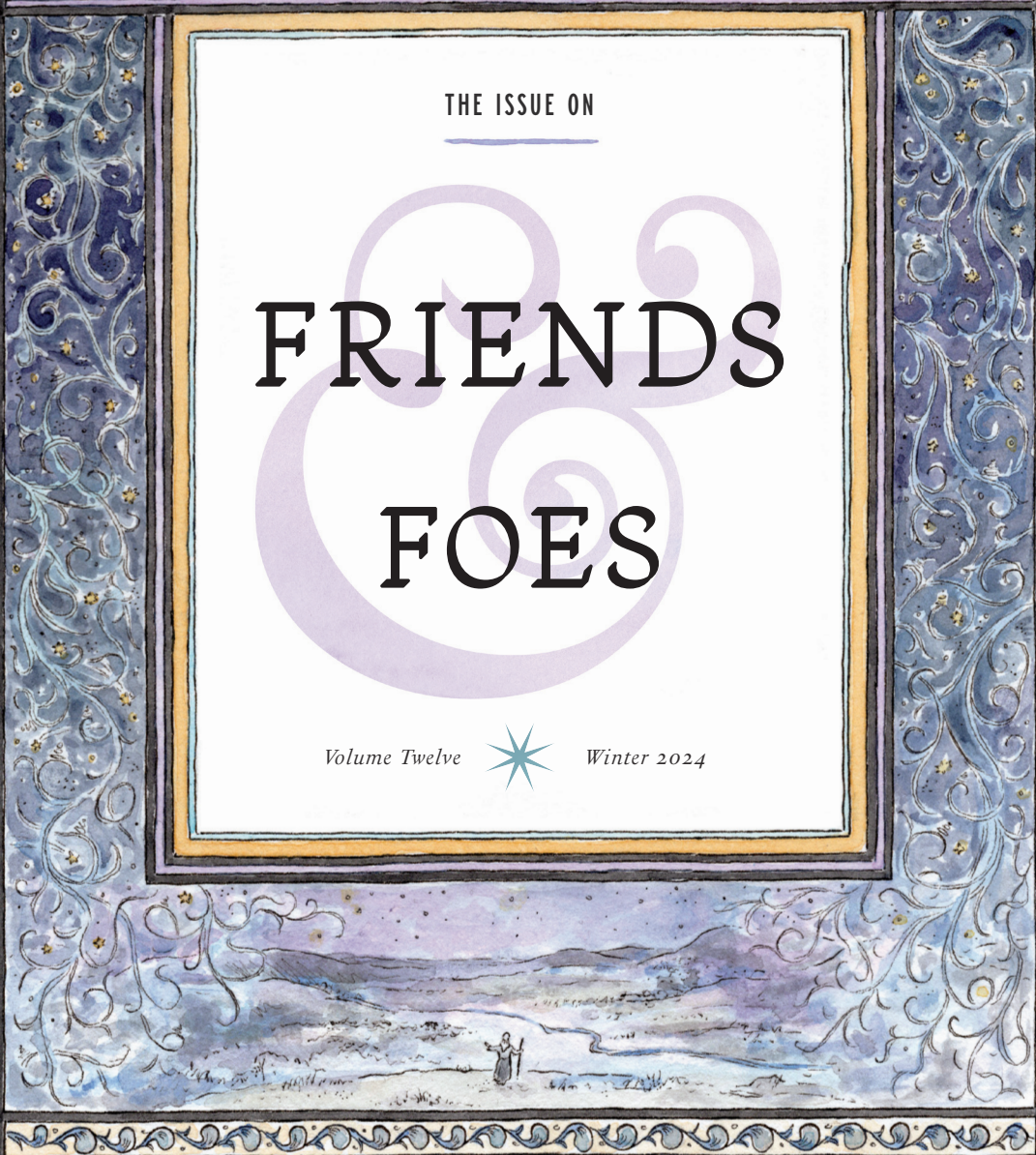
THE ISSUE ON

FRIENDS & FOES

Volume Twelve

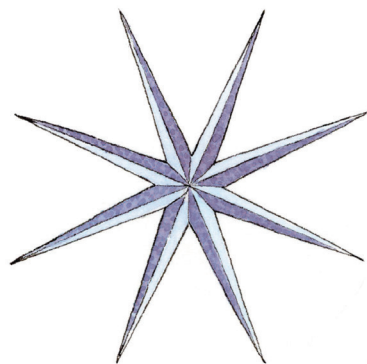


Winter 2024



*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

—Exodus 24:10



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Note on the cover: The figure at the bottom of the cover is Abraham, presiding over a bed of sand below and a sky of stars above, per Genesis 22:17. The conclusion of that verse—“and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes”—is often forgotten, as is the fact that our foes include those among Abraham’s progeny as well.

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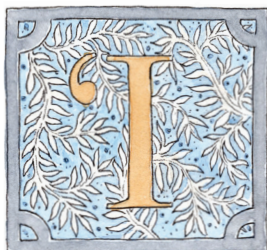
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MARK CHARENOFF

Publisher's Note

*October 7 showed us who our friends are,
and our foes. We must see them both clearly
from now on*



CAN SEE clearly now, the rain is gone.” I always loved this 1972 Johnny Nash hit for its optimism and upbeat tempo. Once the clouds are gone, he sees “the rainbow I’ve been prayin’ for.”

For many of us, October 7 provided the same clarity—but without the rainbow. The shock was something we could scarcely have imagined. Turns out, there were lots of Palestinians who didn’t just want a better life. Turns out, universities in 2023 were okay with antisemitism that we thought died in the 1930s. And turns out, many young socialists and fellow travelers don’t just have a different political vision for Israel. They want it wiped off the map.

I know few people who could have imagined a lack of clarity as to whose side Americans should be on with regard to Hamas and Israel. Hamas is certainly clear on this subject, and if they shared a border with Montana, they would be happy to clarify their feelings to any Americans who remained confused.

We don't like talking about "foes," and we don't spend enough time recognizing our friends. When President Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" in a 1983 speech, he was met with derision by those who felt that it was needlessly bellicose. Vladimir Putin is doing his best to confirm Reagan's instincts and clarity. America and the Jews have real enemies that mean us existential harm. Pretending that the world has evolved past that does us and our children a disservice and leaves the next generation with a far more dangerous future.

The verse in Psalms reminds us that "those who love God hate evil." We are raised not to hate. But hating evil is not just okay. It's required. Standing with Hamas is standing against the Jewish people and against the American people. While it's fine to question the tactics of Israel—though I question the depth of military knowledge of some who do—there should be no question about who is right and good and who is wrong and evil in this war.

This moment also calls on us to thank our friends and deepen our relationships with those who have demonstrated such friendship. Maybe fewer surprises here, but the old adage of "a friend in need is a friend indeed" has proved true. In our hour of need, people stepped up, from the New York construction worker confronting a man tearing down posters of Israeli hostages to Senator John Fetterman, who went from being "that guy with the hoodie" to a pro-Israel superhero.

The ability to "see clearly now" afforded to us after October 7 hasn't been pleasant. But it's been vital. We have allies and adversaries. That makes the action we need to take easier. "Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind." We don't yet have that rainbow, and we have some hard times ahead. But bright sunny days await those who see past the rain. *

AMMIEL HIRSCH

It Is Still October 7

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



OCTOBER 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

Why do young adults, especially, who are so acutely sensitive to the assignment of moral accountability, fail to assign moral agency to Palestinians?

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 investigate in minute detail the monumental strategic, operational, and political failures of October 7. But what seems clear to me already

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.

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 counterattack), 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.

*

PART ONE

FRIENDS

*I will bless those who bless you, and whoever
curses you I will curse; and all the nations of
the earth will be blessed through you.*

— Genesis 12:3



BRET STEPHENS

America (at Her Best)

Like all great friendships, the one between America and the Jews rests on a foundation of shared values and aspirations



IT'S HARD TO OVERSTATE the extent to which the United States is founded on ideals that are philosemitic by conviction, design, and effect.

The Puritans arrived in Massachusetts determined to make a New Jerusalem, modeled on the old: They settled their colony in towns named Salem, Sharon, and Rehoboth. Harvard awarded its first degree to a Jew, Judah Monis, in 1720; he was later hired (albeit after a dubious conversion to Christianity) to teach Hebrew. Francis Salvador, the first Jew to serve in a state assembly—South Carolina's—also became the first Jew to die in the service of American independence in 1776. Florida elected the first Jew to the United States Senate in 1845; California the first Jew to a governorship in 1887; Teddy Roosevelt put the first Jew in the

cabinet in 1906; Woodrow Wilson nominated the first Jew to the Supreme Court in 1916.

Today, the secretaries of state, treasury, and homeland security; the attorney general; the director of national intelligence; the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers; the chief of staff to the president; the governors of Pennsylvania, Illinois, Colorado, and Hawaii; nine U.S. senators, including the majority leader, and 26 members of the House of Representatives are Jewish. So are nearly one-quarter of American Nobel laureates—10 times our share of the overall population—as well as 6 of the 10 richest Americans, all of whom are self-made. (In case you're wondering: Steve Ballmer, Michael Bloomberg, Sergey Brin, Larry Ellison, Larry Page, and Mark Zuckerberg.) It barely rates notice.

America's Jews rose because we are blessed with a culture that values education, initiative, rectitude, hard work, personal responsibility, and full participation in the society of which we are a part. We rose, too, because, for the most part, the broader American society respected and even revered Jewish heritage instead of reviling it, and admired Jewish success instead of envying it. "The Hebrews," wrote John Adams in 1809, "have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation." Ninety years later, Mark Twain marveled, "The Jew... is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains."

America's Founding Fathers also understood, almost intuitively, that the fulfillment of American ideals regarding tolerance, freedom, enterprise, individual responsibility, and the pursuit of happiness, rested on the full equality of Jews as a central feature of our national exceptionalism. "To bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance"—the words of Washington's famous reply to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, R.I.—are among the great expressions of the American creed.

The question is: Will we remain that America for long?

In recent years, but particularly since October 7, there have been reasons to doubt it. In a previous essay in *SAPIR*, “Is There a Future for American Jews?” published in Autumn 2021, I noted a few of them—profound cultural shifts that augured ill for our place in this country.

- A Manichaean racial binary has replaced ethnic pluralism as the defining feature of American diversity—and most Jews, as “conditional whites” (to use the terminology of ethnic-studies curricula), are on the wrong side of that binary.
- The concept of success—rising on your own merits and being admired for it—is giving way to a notion of “privilege,” which rests on the belief that the “haves” are merely beneficiaries of a rigged system while the “have-nots” are its hapless victims.
- Intellectual excellence as a supreme cultural value is out of fashion; in its place there is “equity”—a word that, in practice, means a top-down system of racial gerrymanders aimed at achieving equality of outcomes irrespective of merit.
- Unconventional and often unpopular thinking, of the kind that Jews historically have delighted in, is increasingly difficult to express in an era of groupthink and cancellation.
- Conspiracy theories have gone mainstream. As I wrote then, “A nation that can bring itself to believe anything about anything will, sooner or later, have little trouble believing the worst about Jews.”

In hindsight, I missed two important points.

The first is the effect of ideological polarization in America on Jewish life—the hollowing out of the political center where most Jews had once comfortably sat (albeit usually to the left), and the

American Jews can nurture our identity
as a people, a culture, and a faith without
contributing to the balkanization of
American life through reflexively divisive
forms of identity politics.

growing strength of groups, ideas, and policy proposals formerly considered beyond the pale. Many of the most prominent Never Trumpers in the GOP are Jewish; their estrangement from the GOP has been accompanied by a sharp Republican tilt toward illiberal and isolationist views. Among Democrats, the growing strength of the pro-Palestinian (or rather, pro-Hamas) movement has left pro-Israel liberals feeling nervous and on the defensive and wondering whether Joe Biden will be the last Democratic president instinctively on their side.

Between the Israel-hating Left and the liberalism-hating Right, the space for Jewish political influence is becoming dangerously narrow. What could follow is antisemitism on a scale that makes even the present moment seem tame.

This is bad enough. But the second point is more serious yet: A growing number of Americans, especially younger ones, have little to no idea of what it means to be an American. They have a weak grasp of the principles on which the country was founded. They have been told many stories of the country's many sins but fewer ones of its greatness and virtue. In 2021, a poll of 18- to 24-year-olds (that is, Gen Z) found that 54 percent of them view capitalism negatively while 52 percent view socialism positively. More alarming, 31 percent of young Americans in a December 2023 poll agreed with the proposition that "democracy is no longer a viable system, and

America should explore alternative forms of government.” Another 28 percent “neither agree nor disagree.”

It may still be improbable that Americans will abandon the founding tenets of our system—younger people always incline toward radicalism, and with age often comes wisdom. But nobody should suppose that it’s impossible. Saving America for itself, and thus saving it as a haven for Jews, will take work that Jews can’t do alone. Fortunately, we still have many friends for this common endeavor.



Who are they? One way of thinking about it is to draw up lists of specific demographic groups: pro-Israel Evangelical Christians and many Catholics, American Hindus and East Asians, middle-of-the-road liberals and conservatives, Flyover Country USA, and so on. There’s value in seeing specific points of commonality among Jews and other groups and finding ways of building alliances with them.

But while making and maintaining specific allies is important, it isn’t sufficient. What has protected Jews in the United States since our arrival in North America in 1654 is not that we made common cause with other ethnic or religious groups. It’s that we exemplified and championed powerful ideals—none more powerful than the ideals of America itself. We have made and will make friends with people of any group—racial, religious, ethnic, political, social—who share those traditional ideals.

Here are 10 of them.

1) *Merit*. The furor that led to Claudine Gay’s departure as Harvard’s president wasn’t only about her incompetence as a leader after October 7, her performance before Congress, or her plagiarism. It was about a system that promoted a person with a thin scholarly record to the pinnacle of American academia, almost certainly on account of her race and gender. And it showed that the principles of meritocracy are still something that millions of Americans

treasure and would like to see restored, especially in educational institutions that are supposed to exemplify it. Jews—among the great beneficiaries of American meritocracy—can help ourselves by championing it, vocally and consistently, in the institutions we lead, advise, or serve.

2) *Patriotism*. America has been good to Jews as has no other country in history. Where is the sense in not expressing our gratitude? Yes, part of being a patriot also means being a critic: You can't create a "more perfect union" without noticing the many ways we remain imperfect. But patriotism also means rebutting the self-loathing that now typifies so many discussions about America's past and present—from the notion that our Founding Fathers were nothing more than hypocritical racists to the argument that white supremacy remains the dominant fact of American life. Most Americans intuitively understand that these beliefs are outrageous distortions of reality. They understand, too, that a nation that despises itself does irreparable damage to the fabric of its society. It's a trend Jews should fight.

3) *Integration*. One of the paradoxical challenges facing Jewish continuity in the United States, where we've found so much acceptance, is how to remain a nation slightly apart—to honor what makes us distinctive without ghettoizing ourselves. But that's a good problem to have, just as it's good to honor the American ideal of *e pluribus unum*. American Jews can nurture our identity as a people, a culture, and a faith without contributing to the balkanization of American life through reflexively divisive forms of identity politics—usually expressed in mindless disdain for mainstream American culture and the fetishization of small differences.

4) *Free enterprise*. The American Dream, which continues to draw millions of people to our shores, is largely an economic dream: not just of prosperity, but also of the opportunities that lead to it. No minority group exemplifies the possibilities of that dream as clearly as the Jews do. Our family stories—almost always involving an ancestor fleeing oppression and coming to America with no money,

A clear majority of Americans admire the Jewish state because it exhibits many of the same traits that Americans have long admired in their Jewish neighbors: resilience, feistiness, resourcefulness, against-the-grain thinking, reverence for the past, confidence in the future.

no English, and next to no education—refute the narrative about an intolerant system invariably favoring the established elite. That’s a story we need to tell ourselves as well as others, while helping ensure that our system, from the tax code and business regulations to charter schools and admissions practices, always tilts in favor of those who believe in aspiration, not entitlement.

5) *Free expression.* There is a view that the rise in antisemitism over the past decade is somehow a function of too much free speech. The opposite is closer to the mark: Antisemitism has become more pervasive in one of the most censorious periods of American history. Why? Perhaps it’s because the speech police, whether on college campuses or in the media, are only selectively intolerant—some forms of speech are strictly forbidden, while others are tolerated and even embraced. It’s how a society that cannot permit even quotations of racial epithets has come to be so tolerant of chants calling for the destruction of the only Jewish state. For Jews to embrace free expression as a supreme democratic value should never mean gratuitously offending anyone. It does mean refusing to bow to a self-anointed elite that thinks it has a right to determine what can and cannot be said.

6) “*Think different.*” Apple’s famous marketing slogan from the

late 1990s could also be the motto of the Jewish people, with similarly broad appeal. America—founded by Protestant “nonconformists,” better known as the Puritans—has always had a soft spot for all sorts of free thinkers, dissenters, and originals. A disproportionate number of them, from Joseph Pulitzer to Richard Feynman to Elaine May, have been Jews. A culture of argument, skepticism, and independent thinking has made Jews an abiding source of inspiration and creativity to many Americans. It’s something that, with a bit of courage, we can continue to model.

7) *The content of our character.* It wasn’t long ago that the most famous phrase from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech—immediately preceded by a prayer to ignore the color of skin—was an article of American faith. That faith has been eroded by the relentless racialization of American discourse and practice, so much so that King himself would be considered a white supremacist according to the leading ideologues of critical race theory. Yet most Americans still hold to the ideal of a society that judges people by their virtues, not their identity; that rejects every form of racial essentialism; that, even when it can’t quite see past skin color, at least makes the attempt. That’s a dream from which Jews have greatly benefited—and that we should keep alive.

8) *Self-empowerment.* People often sympathize with victims; they rarely admire them. The story of the Jewish people could easily be one of almost relentless victimization—except that Jews have consistently refused to play the part. It is the reluctance of Jews to think of ourselves as victims that not only explains our endurance as a people but also accounts for the philosemitism from which we have also benefited, above all in the United States. It says something that, despite rising antisemitism, Jews, as of 2023, remain the most admired religious group in the United States—not because Americans always love a winner (although we usually do), but because we respect those who, to paraphrase the old song, pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start all over again.

9) *Zionism.* A clear majority of Americans admire the Jewish

state because it exhibits many of the same traits that Americans have long admired in their Jewish neighbors: resilience, feistiness, resourcefulness, against-the-grain thinking, reverence for the past, confidence in the future. That remains true in the midst of the current war: According to a Gallup poll from December, 62 percent of American adults say that U.S. support for Israel is either “the right amount” or “too little,” as against 36 percent who say it is “too much.” Americans are often mystified (or put off) by the ambivalence or disdain that liberal or progressive Jewish Americans sometimes express about Israel. Such self-loathing, as the French saying has it, is worse than a crime, it’s a mistake. People admire those who respect themselves. That makes American Jewish support for Israel critical—not just for Israel, but for American Jewry itself.

10) *Heritage*. Freedom not only of but also from religion is a precious American inheritance, one for which all American Jews feel particularly grateful. But Jews are the People of the Book—and reverence for that Book is what largely accounts for America’s centuries-old fondness for its Jews. Secular Jews (including me) ought to be mindful that our friends go far beyond Evangelicals whose fervor some of us find off-putting and whose political views are often well to the right of our own. Our friends are Americans who understand that a Judeo-Christian heritage is the bedrock on which our democratic experiment is built. We should treasure our status as the originals in a common tradition that is central to how hundreds of millions of people understand themselves.



These are the ideas that make America what it is. They are the basis on which America’s love for the Jews and the Jewish love for America were first built and can still be sustained.

The greatest danger for American Jews does not lie in the rise of pro-Palestinian sentiment among younger Americans, bad as

that is. It's in the abandonment or rejection of the ideals that have made the marriage of America and the Jews such a long, fruitful, and happy one. Today, we are fighting not simply to keep America good for the Jews. We also have an opportunity to return the original favor by championing the ideals listed above, so that American exceptionalism and the American Dream can maintain their promise for all those we count as friends.

The essays in this issue of SAPIR explore the pitfalls and the possibilities. *

February 15, 2024

A conversation with
RITCHIE TORRES

Pro-Israel Progressives

Israel's once-robust set of friendships on the progressive Left has been stripped back. Is pro-Israel congressman Ritchie Torres the past or the future?



REPRESENTATIVE *Ritchie Torres* of New York's 15th congressional district has emerged as a leading pro-Israel figure among young progressives. *SAPIR* Editor-in-Chief *Bret Stephens* interviewed him about his sometimes lonely support for Israel and what it says about the future of the Jewish state in Democratic politics. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Bret Stephens: Let me begin with this double question. First, tell us about your journey as a progressive. And second, tell us about your journey as a supporter of Israel.

Ritchie Torres: My progressive values are ultimately rooted in my lived experience. I don't fit into the typical profile of a member of Congress. I don't come from a political family. I don't have a net worth over a million dollars. I don't even have a college degree. But what I lack in formal credentials I make up for in lived experience. I know what it's like to face food insecurity and housing insecurity, poverty and inequality. I know what it's like to have two brothers who spent most of their adult life in prison. Out of these experiences comes empathy for the plight of poor people.

I spent almost all my life in poverty. I was raised by a single mother who had to raise three children on minimum wage, which in the 1990s was \$4.25 an hour. The most formative experience of my life was growing up in public housing, which is run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). If NYCHA were a city unto itself, it would be the largest city of low-income black and brown Americans in the United States. It houses about a half a million people. But it's been so chronically underfunded that there are hundreds of thousands of residents who live in conditions of mold and mildew, leaks and lead, without consistent heat and hot water in the winter. My experience in public housing is what inspired my start in politics as a housing advocate.

When it comes to Israel, I'm an improbable Zionist, because I grew up in an almost exclusively African-American and Latino community. I had almost no engagement with the Jewish community for most of my childhood. And by the time I became an elected official, about 10 years ago, in the New York City Council, I was still a blank slate on the issue of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. I was invited by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York to go on a delegation to Israel, and it was the first time I had an opportunity to travel abroad. When I went to Israel, it was one of the most informative and transformative experiences of my life—going to Yad Vashem, going to Masada, going to a place like Sderot.

I remember speaking to the local mayor, who said that the majority of his children struggle with post-traumatic stress because

their family lives under the threat of relentless rocket fire. I remember seeing bus stops doubling as bomb shelters, and I thought to myself, *Imagine the sheer trauma of a child who's seeking refuge in a bomb shelter while sirens are going off, and adults are panicking and rockets are being fired.* I grew up in the Bronx, where people live in fear of bullets. But no one in the Bronx lives in fear of rockets, no one is concerned that Mexico and Canada one day are going to fire thousands of rockets into American communities. My experience in Israel led me to realize that Israel faces a level of insecurity and volatility that has no equivalent in the American experience.

Stephens: I once heard you joke that the reason you're pro-Israel is that you dropped out of NYU. Can you say another word about that?

Torres: Look, when I saw the congressional hearing and the testimony of the three Ivy League presidents, I said to myself, *I've never been more proud to be a college dropout.* I did not graduate from Yale, Harvard, or Princeton. But I did graduate from the school of common sense. If you asked average Bronx residents, "Is calling for a genocide of Jews harassment?" most of them will tell you: "Of course, it's harassment." But if you ask an ivory-tower academic, "Is calling for a genocide of Jews harassment?" their response is going to be coldly legalistic: "It's context-dependent." It seems to me that the loss of moral common sense is not a bug but a feature of what higher education has become.

There's something rotten in the state of the higher-education industrial complex. Exhibit A was the Cornell professor who announced in the aftermath of October 7 that he was exhilarated by the mass murder of Jews in Israel. If you have an ideology that causes you to rationalize and even romanticize terrorism, then there's something profoundly and pathologically wrong with your ideology.

Stephens: Some of the people who call themselves progressives, within the Democratic Party or outside of it—that's not how they see it. They're seeing it from a very different place. Do you have a

It seems to me that the loss of moral common sense is not a bug but a feature of what higher education has become.

sense of what forms their views? You do share a common label, and often common political views, at least when it comes to poverty, equity, equality, and so on. Where is it that your journey departs from theirs? How is it that you think that they've come to that set of views? Is it because they went to NYU?

Torres: I see academia and social media as the disproportionate drivers of antisemitism, particularly on the far Left. But I'm a pragmatist. I tend to be suspicious of grand ideological narratives that purport to explain all of reality, whereas I find that I have a number of colleagues who see the world through overarching narratives. Whether you call the idea "intersectionality" or "decolonization," there is an ideology that divides the world into oppressor versus oppressed, colonizer versus colonized, black versus white, powerful versus powerless. In the minds of those people, Israel is the oppressor and therefore can do no right. And Hamas is the oppressed and therefore can do no wrong.

That is the simplistic, distorting lens through which the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is seen. But I see it through the lens of moral common sense: Moral common sense tells me that murdering children and civilians is purely and simply and absolutely evil, regardless of your skin pigmentation and regardless of your power status. I think that's how most people think.

Stephens: Talk to me about the politics of opposing Israel. We had some progressive members of Congress in the past few years come into office by defeating pro-Israel incumbents. Their opposition to

Israel seems to be part of their political calling card. Now there's a question about how much staying power they're going to have.

Do you think anti-Israel politics are going to spread? Are they going to become more of a sellable feature in electoral politics, especially at the primary level for Democrats? Or is this a dead end? Are Democratic candidates who run on this going to discover that it's a real problem for them at the political level — that it's not going to win votes?

Torres: Only time will tell. There is a struggle for the soul of the Democratic Party. On the subject of Israel, there's a divide between liberals and leftists, between traditional Democrats and Democratic Socialists. The Democratic Socialists of America, the DSA—which, on October 8, celebrated October 7—is strategic enough to recognize that the two-party system is so deeply entrenched that there's never going to be a viable third party in America. And so their objective is to take over the Democratic Party from within, to impose ideological litmus tests on issues like Israel, and then to cleanse the party of anyone who fails those litmus tests. That war is largely unfolding at the level of congressional primaries.

The DSA is to the Democratic Party in American politics what Jeremy Corbyn became to the Labour Party in British politics. The burden falls on traditional Democrats, like myself, to resist the Jeremy Corbynization of progressive politics. Forgive the analogy, but I think we have a choice: Either we can be Vichy Democrats who cooperate and collaborate with the DSA occupation, or we can resist it. I choose to resist it.

Stephens: And how do you do it? What is the strategy in terms of ground-level politics? How do you fashion your arguments to win over young voters, who may be bamboozled for idealistic reasons into thinking that Israel–Palestine is the apartheid issue of their time, and that they have to take sides? What are the strategies and tactics that someone in your wing of the party uses to make

the case, win votes, and win over those who don't agree with you at the beginning?

Torres: I am convinced that I represent the pragmatic, common-sense sensibilities of most Democratic voters. I remind my friends that we have to keep in mind that Twitter is not the real world. We have to be careful not to mistake a visible vocal minority on Twitter for the majority of the American people. The activists who are disrupting air travel and traffic during the holidays are unrepresentative of the silent majority of Americans.

I refuse to live in fear of the extremes, who are far more powerful on Twitter than in the real world and on the ground. These tend to be largely white activists who purport to speak for people of color without actually speaking to them.

I would argue that the greatest threat to liberal democracy comes not from the far Left or from the far Right, but from the complacency and cowardice of a center that lives in fear of the extremes. And I refuse to live in fear. The Achilles' heel of most elected officials is a pathological need to be loved by everyone. And I have no need to be loved. I would rather stand up for what I think is right, even if it means standing alone, even if it means facing criticism and ostracism. And so I would tell my colleagues in elected office: The only thing we have to fear, as Franklin Roosevelt said, is fear itself.

Stephens: You come not only from a Latino and a black community, but also a gay community, which, shockingly, certainly to me, often takes pro-Palestinian positions—shocking because the treatment of LGBTQ people in the Palestinian territories is barbaric and horrifying. And of course, Israel is a model in that sense, certainly in the Middle East. Do you have any sense of why that is? And is it as widespread as it appears to be? Sometimes I think I'm taking my cues too much from social media and not really having a sense of where the community stands.

If you think of antisemitism as a virus, intersectionality has become the vector that carries that virus across a wide range of progressive causes.

Torres: It's certainly the case that young people are increasingly critical of Israel, are more skeptical about Israel, and some of them are outright anti-Israel. When I announced that I was going on my first delegation to Israel, in 2014, I became the target of overwhelming vitriol and hatred. There were activists who were accusing me of betraying my race and sexuality, and aiding and abetting apartheid and ethnic cleansing and genocide. The rhetoric, even 10 years ago, was intense.

There was a rally on the steps of City Hall against me. I remember coming across an activist who had a shirt that read "Queers for Palestine." At that point, I had done some research. I asked the activist, "I'm just curious, what is your opinion of Hamas?" And I honestly thought that she was going to tell me, "Well, I support Palestinian rights. But of course, I condemn a terrorist organization like Hamas." Instead, she said she supports Hamas. Because Hamas is fighting for the liberation of the Palestinian people, Hamas is resisting the Zionist occupation.

When I heard that response, I was in a state of shock. I had the beginnings of an epiphany. I said the fact that an LGBTQ activist would defend a terrorist organization that systematically and savagely murdered LGBTQ people was as clear a sign as any of the utter stupidity and absurdity and moral bankruptcy that the BDS movement has inflicted on progressive politics. Over time, I came to realize that one of the most influential ideas on college campuses,

on social media, is the idea of intersectionality. There's an anti-semitic version of intersectionality, which holds that you cannot be both progressive and pro-Israel. So I would go to an immigration-reform rally, and someone would utter the words, "From Mexico to Palestine." And I would ask myself, *What does Mexico have to do with Palestine?* I would go to a criminal-justice reform rally, and someone would utter the words "From Ferguson to Palestine." And I would ask myself, *What does Ferguson have to do with Palestine?* And then it occurred to me that there was a concerted effort by the BDS movement to make everything about Israel, to transform every progressive cause into a delegitimization campaign against Israel. If you think of antisemitism as a virus, intersectionality has become the vector that carries that virus across a wide range of progressive causes. And so I saw clearly the insidious antisemitism that was permeating in progressive circles.

Stephens: Do you think the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) lost a lot of sympathy when, on October 8, it was tweeting images of paragliders, plainly in support of what Hamas had done? How damaging do you think that was to BLM, not just in the black community, but on the liberal and Democratic side of politics as a whole?

Torres: I want to be careful because that was one affiliate of BLM. BLM is more of a brand—there are a whole host of organizations that claim the brand of BLM. But those activists are unrepresentative of most black people. I represent a heavily black district. I've never had a single constituent, a black constituent or Latino constituent, raise objections to the position that I've taken on Israel—and I've been one of the most visible and vocal advocates for Israel in the United States Congress.

Young people are much more hostile toward Israel than older people are. The college-educated tend to be more hostile toward Israel. I would argue that educational attainment and age are far more predictive of one's attitudes toward Israel than race. It is worth pointing

out that, were it not for the African-American vote, Bernie Sanders, rather than Joe Biden, would have been the Democratic nominee, and Bernie Sanders would have been far more hostile toward Israel. The older African-American vote has been a moderating force in the Democratic Party, to the benefit of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Stephens: We're also interested in the role of philanthropy, activism, even lobbying. Your journey really began with a trip to Israel that was sponsored by a pro-Israel group. It clearly had a transformative effect on your thinking about the conflict, and I suspect, of the world. What works, what doesn't? If you're talking to philanthropists in the Jewish community, what should they be doing more of? And what should they be doing less of?

Torres: It's a hard question to answer. I think there's no substitute for firsthand experience, for direct travel to Israel. I tell people: I'm not going to tell you how to think, but all I will tell you is you should actually go to Israel. I find that in Congress, the most vociferous critics of Israel have actually never been there.

People should go to Israel, speak to both Israelis and Palestinians, Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, see the facts on the ground with their own eyes, go to a place like Sderot. You will come to a view of Israel that is far more complicated than the caricature that percolates on social media. The trouble is that the opinion that young people hold about Israel is increasingly formed not by firsthand experience, but by TikTok, by hashtags. And that does a disservice to the truth and it does a disservice to Israel.

Stephens: I'm just being candid: Sometimes I feel there's a side to the pro-Israel community that is, frankly, obnoxious, off-putting, unsubtle. Do you think that's something that people who are involved in Jewish philanthropy should care about? How do you approach potential allies and friends in a way that's effective? And how do you approach them in a way that's not moralizing or condescending?

Torres: Well, I will raise one concern, and we might have a disagreement here. But I've been outspoken against campus antisemitism long before October 7, and I've had Shabbat dinner with Jewish students at Columbia University and elsewhere to show solidarity. But I will confess I do worry about the fight against campus antisemitism if it comes to be associated with an ideological assault on diversity. I do worry that you run the risk of polarizing the issue, transforming it into a right-wing cause, and alienating the black political establishment, in particular. It is not in the interest of the pro-Israel community for the fight against antisemitism to become a right-wing cause. It should be a cause that transcends partisanship.

There are legitimate concerns about DEI. It is certainly the case that there are DEI programs that have become Trojan horses for anti-Zionism, that have portrayed Jews as oppressors. That's cause for concern. But I would take a different approach than the one that I've seen percolating in the past few months.

Stephens: I'm not sure I disagree with you at all. I think that's an incredibly important point of view. Another thing I'd love your reflections on is the fight against antisemitism ending up as suppression of free speech. One common argument, which I think is a red herring, is: You criticize Israel, and you're accused of antisemitism and hate speech. But there is a real question, for instance, about banning groups like Students for Justice in Palestine on college campuses.

I've seen people take very different views on the subject, and I struggle in my own mind as to what the right thing to do is. Do you think it's effective to try to ban those groups or to ban certain kinds of speech because you believe they're antisemitic or have shades of antisemitism? Or is that counterproductive?

Torres: I find that people bring up free speech as a pretext for defending the indefensible. And it's brought up only selectively. The First Amendment applies to the government, it applies to Congress. But private universities can have a code of conduct.

Private universities can impose restrictions that Congress cannot impose and should never impose. It's not clear to me that private universities should operate under the same constraints that would bind me, for example, as a member of Congress.

I'll give you a concrete example. Long before October 7, CUNY School of Law had a commencement speaker who gave what I thought was a vehemently anti-Israel and, dare I say, antisemitic speech. A year before the speech, that same person went on the streets of New York and said that Zionist [professors] should be purged from every classroom on every college campus. And a few years before that, she said that Zionists should burn in the hottest pit of hell. This was the person who was allowed to deliver a commencement speech.

I asked myself, *If she had called for the destruction of Haiti and Jamaica, or the destruction of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, would she have been permitted to serve as a graduation speaker?* There's no doubt in my mind that the answer is no. So then it raises the question: Why is there a double standard when it comes to antisemitism? Why is there a double standard at the expense of the Jewish community? That commencement speaker has a right to her own opinion, a right to her own speech. But her speech is not entitled to the imprimatur of a public university and the platform of a commencement speech. That's where I would draw the line.

Stephens: You and John Fetterman—and I think people were surprised by Senator Fetterman—represent a pole in the progressive movement that I think a lot of people have been a little surprised by. Is there a secret club that we're unaware of? That's much larger, that we should know about? Because I think when Fetterman came out and expressed [his support for Israel] with a lot of humor and energy and passion, people were like, wow, we can't believe this. Is it just the Ritchie Torres–John Fetterman caucus, or is there a secret society that we should be aware of?

Torres: There is a secret club. It's called the Three Johns: John Kirby, John Fetterman, and Ritchie John. My middle name is John, so it doesn't quite—I'm kidding.

But sometimes in life you find friends in the places where you would least expect. Sometimes the people from whom you expect the most deliver the least, and sometimes the people from whom you expect the least deliver the most. That's part of the beauty of America. It's the country of improbable friendships. I suspect that the common thread between Senator Fetterman and myself is that both of us are idiosyncratic, independent thinkers. And we don't have a pathological need to be loved by everyone around us. We do what we think is right. He has been a powerful example of moral clarity and moral leadership in the United States Senate.

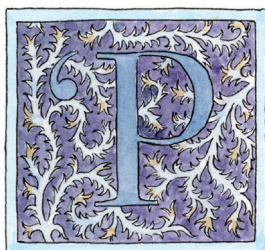
Stephens: As you have been in the United States Congress. Congressman Torres, Ritchie, thank you so much for this interview. So many lapidary sentences and incredibly sharp and sharpening thoughts. As a writer, I find it really a joy to listen to you speak.

Torres: That's a high compliment coming from you, Bret. Thank you. *

NOAM WEISSMAN

(Israel) Educators

Is the American Jewish community suffering from the Dunning-Kruger effect?



OLLY PUT the kettle on, we'll all have tea." This endearing 19th-century nursery rhyme is catchy, but one is left wondering, "Put the kettle on what? What's in the kettle? Why do you need to put the kettle on to have tea?"

E.D. Hirsch Jr.—American literary critic and educational theorist—reminds us that these questions are left unsaid and the answers taken for granted. Millions of people sing this nursery rhyme, unconscious of the background knowledge one needs in order to understand this song.

If this is true regarding something as benign as these nine words, what about when it comes to Jewish identity, Zionism, and Israel education? What are Jewish communities "singing" while taking for granted? And, perhaps more important, what shared knowledge do we think we have but don't?

In the May 2017 edition of Yeshiva University's student newspaper, *The Commentator*, the outgoing president, Richard Joel, shared one of his memorable epithets. He talked about the importance of

investing not only in *klei kodesh* (vessels of holiness, metaphorically referring to rabbinic leaders) but also in lay *kodesh*, referring to the responsibility of non-rabbinic teachers and leaders to be knowledgeable, skilled, and Jewishly erudite.

The value of an educated public can hardly be overstated, specifically as it relates to the conversation about Israel and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, a topic often discussed with breathtaking levels of ignorance. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Berkeley professor Ron Hassner reported on a survey conducted of “250 students from a variety of backgrounds across the U.S.” When asked about the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” chanted frequently at rallies, “most said they supported the chant, some enthusiastically so (32.8%) and others to a lesser extent (53.2%).”

These stats were very disturbing, but even more disturbing was the fact that “only 47% of the students who embrace the slogan were able to name the river and the sea.” He went on to point out other painfully embarrassing ignorant moments, such as the fact that “less than a quarter of these students knew who Yasser Arafat was (12 of them, or more than 10%, thought he was the first prime minister of Israel).” And, “asked in what decade Israelis and Palestinians had signed the Oslo Accords, more than a quarter of the chant’s supporters claimed that no such peace agreements had ever been signed.”

Ironically, Hassner’s article offered some hope to the “pro-Israel” world when he concluded that “after learning a handful of basic facts about the Middle East, 67.8% of students went from supporting ‘from the river to sea’ to rejecting the mantra.”

What a difference a bit of knowledge makes.



Notwithstanding the absurdity of protesting something one fundamentally doesn’t understand (and, broadly speaking, advocating genocide), the members of Jewish WhatsApp groups mocking these

college students may well be throwing stones in glass houses, unaware of their (and our) own gaps in knowledge.

Over the past six years, I have made it my mission to ensure there is a campaign of education about Israel and Zionism for the next generation. In my community lectures, from Sydney to Miami, I often reference a quotation from Mahmoud Abbas: “From 1947 to the present day, Israel has committed 50 massacres in Palestinian villages and cities—in Deir Yassin, Tantura, Kafr Qasim, and many others—50 massacres, 50 holocausts. And until today, and every day, there are casualties killed by the Israeli military.” I then ask the audience what they think of Abbas’s comments. “They’re hideous!” People shout. “Antisemitic,” many scream. I agree. But when I ask: “What happened in Deir Yassin? What happened in Kafr Qasim? Do you have any clue what he is talking about?” Blank stares.

On a visit after October 7 to one of the premier Jewish high schools in the country, the principal informed me that many of the students “can’t locate Gaza” on a map. One Modern Orthodox middle school shared that more than 75 percent of their students had “a strong emotional attachment to Israel,” but when asked to define Zionism, a full 60 percent wrote, “I don’t know what Zionism is.”

How can we look at ourselves in the mirror and ask our young people to represent Zionism when they do not know what Zionism is? And if they don’t know what Zionism is, how could they ever distinguish between that of Jabotinsky and that of Weitzman? Do they know the history of 1936–1939 and how it informs the narrative of October 7? Are they able to think through the Hebron massacre of 1929 and have the ability to identify historical through lines and intellectual themes as they relate to Sheikh Jarrah and the May 2021 fight between Hamas and Israel?

How can we bemoan the ignorance of those who oppose Jewish statehood if so many in our own community lack such basic knowledge of the competing narratives about its founding? As a community, what is our responsibility?

On a visit after October 7 to one of the premier Jewish high schools in the country, the principal informed me that many of the students ‘can’t locate Gaza’ on a map.

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In 1999, psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger published a landmark study exploring the gap between people’s actual knowledge of a given topic and their confidence in that level of knowledge. It turns out that when a person knows nothing about a topic, he is often quite aware of his ignorance. But when he knows something, not a lot, he is overly (and erroneously) confident in what he thinks he knows. This is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect.

In their landmark study, Dunning and Kruger reached this conclusion:

When people are incompetent in the strategies they adopt to achieve success and satisfaction, they suffer a dual burden: Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it. Instead...they are left with the mistaken impression that they are doing just fine....The same knowledge that underlies the ability to produce correct judgment is also the knowledge that underlies the ability to recognize correct judgment. To lack the former is to be deficient in the latter.

In other words, they saw that Charles Darwin was right when he argued in *The Descent of Man* in 1871 that “ignorance more

frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.” This can afflict any of us who have some competence in a given area but linger at the middle-knowledge level—we can fall into a trap of thinking we know much more than we actually do. It’s at that point that our confidence trumps our competence and we are not aware of it. As David Dunning himself has quipped, “The first rule of the Dunning-Kruger club is you don’t know you’re a member of the Dunning-Kruger club.”

This self-assuredness has plagued the Jewish community before. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik essentially said as much in his 1973 essay “The ‘Common-Sense’ Rebellion Against Torah Authority,” pointing out the unwarranted confidence of those who make religious legal decisions for themselves without consulting rabbinic authorities. They suffer from the Dunning-Kruger effect (by definition, without even realizing it).

These self-styled “poskim” (Jewish legal authorities) concede their lack of formal training in Jewish texts and sources, but they insist nonetheless on their right to decide fundamental religious questions on the basis of “common sense.”... “Hokhmah” (wisdom) refers to specialized knowledge and scholarship which are acquired by extensive and detailed study. “Binah” (understanding) is the capacity to analyze, to make distinctions, to draw inferences and apply them to various situations. When “binah” is combined with “hokhmah”, we have the especially gifted and creative thinker. “Daat” (knowledge) deals with common sense, basic intelligence, and sound practical judgment. [Parenthetical translations added.]

Although Rabbi Soloveitchik did not reference the Dunning-Kruger effect specifically, he was describing the very same impulse, present in all of us, to hold and advance our convictions without the requisite background. And for this, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s solution was to temper our conviction, our certainty, with humility.

While humility is a great virtue, I submit that the Dunning-Kruger epidemic in our community today requires a more aggressive treatment. What Rabbi Soloveitchik sought to address 50 years ago was the excess of confidence. In Israel education today, I propose the opposite: Bring the knowledge base up rather than the confidence down. For that, I suggest three areas of focus, the three C's: Curiosity, Content, and Courage.

1 | *Curiosity*

Wharton organizational psychologist Adam Grant has described our society as one with an “advocacy surplus and inquiry deficit.” Julia Galef describes it as placing a “soldier mindset” over a “scout mindset.” A soldier mindset is one in which we seek out evidence to fortify our views. In such an approach to knowledge acquisition, reasoning becomes defensive combat, a tactic to stave off defeat. A scout mindset is one that seeks evidence that will make our map more accurate. With this approach, reasoning is exploratory, an opportunity to revise our misconceived mental maps.

In 1982, Mortimer Adler created the Paideia Proposal, an “essentialist” curriculum underscoring 12 principles of foundational education. One of these principles is “that the primary cause of genuine learning is the activity of the learner’s own mind, sometimes with the help of a teacher functioning as a secondary and cooperative cause.”

This principle highlights the educational value of appealing to the learner’s “intrinsic motivation”—engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable (as opposed to “extrinsic motivation,” engaging in an activity as a means to an end). The key, therefore, to engaging the learner’s own mind is to spark her internal curiosity. Often we hear that young people are disaffected and apathetic, but in my career—both as a school principal and an executive at an educational media company with a mission to teach the world about Judaism and Israel—I have found the opposite. When we present ideas slightly discrepant from learners’ existing knowledge and beliefs and

we incorporate surprise and incongruity into the learning experience, young people respond with genuine curiosity.

Once there is curiosity, a learner will be intrinsically motivated to explore the wide contours of dispute that exist within a given topic, something our communities have sometimes shied away from when it comes to *Zionism and Israel*. As I wrote in *The Lehrhaus* in 2021:

It's time for a *Mikraot Gedolot* approach to Israel education. What do I mean by this? Pick up a volume of *Mikraot Gedolot* and flip to any page. You will see a few lines from the Torah; the remaining 90% of the page is filled with debate and discussion about what these lines mean... Now imagine a *Mikraot Gedolot* of Israel education that included the perspectives of diverse thinkers like Benny Morris, Anita Shapira, Martin Gilbert, Daniel Gordis, Yossi Klein Halevi, Micah Goodman, and Francine Klagsbrun... Let's showcase the exciting wide contours of dispute that exist within Zionism, Israeli history, and current events in Israel, so our students can appreciate each topic's complexity and engage with diverse viewpoints.

The appearance of these different perspectives on the page deepens a learner's curiosity while providing the means to satisfy it. For our communities to be culturally literate in the issues that matter to us, exploring these diverse voices is not a luxury but a necessity. We can utilize the tools of intrinsic motivation to hook our audiences and get them intrigued to learn more. That is the first step. The second step is content.

2 | Content

Another of Adler's Paideia principles is "that schooling at its best is preparation for becoming generally educated in the course of a whole lifetime, and that schools should be judged on how well they provide such preparation." Schools now have tools such as Unpacked

for Educators and The Jewish Education Project and resources like the iCenter (to name a few) to ensure that the next generation of teachers is well versed in the history of Israel and Zionism. For educators, we have the tools we need.

But it's reaching the rest of the community, particularly young professionals, that poses a challenge. Writing in these pages in Autumn 2021, Daniel Gordis offered an inspired vision:

Imagine a Jewish world re-embracing Jewish and Hebrew literature, in which first hundreds and then thousands of American Jews were reading at least snippets of important works, and then conversing about them across communal, congregational, and denominational lines... What if we knew that the congregation down the block—different denomination, dissimilar politics, a wholly other worldview—was studying the same concepts, the same texts? Would there not be power in that shared experience, not only in continuity but in unity as well?

To be sure, I would argue for a maximalist definition of “Jewish and Hebrew literature”—one that includes the philosophy of Zionism, the history of antisemitism, and the story of the Jewish people from antiquity to the modern State of Israel. Think of it as Birthright Israel Education. And in an age of ubiquitous media technology, what would it take for us to harness platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify to realize this vision?

Let's chart it out: In the United States there are approximately 5.7 million Jews. If we focus on the 26 percent who are age 18–34—90 percent of whom are not ultra-Orthodox—that is a target audience of 1.3 million young Jews. At Unpacked, a leading Jewish and Israel education content provider that I help run, we produce engaging digital content modules that can provide a basic Israel education in as few as five hours. That comes to 6.7 million hours of content. At a cost of \$4.90 per hour, minus production costs that have already been sunk, we're looking at a distribution cost of \$2.40, coming to

We need our funding communities to invest in digital education so we'll have the courage to continue these conversations.

\$16 million. Targeted advertising to reach those 1.3 million young Jews, according to our internal data, would increase our ad costs substantially, by 45 percent, bringing us to \$18.5 million. Ensuring that five hours of educational videos like “The Secret Agreement That Shaped the Modern Middle East” (about Sykes-Picot and the San Remo conference) and “Did Israel Take Over Palestine?” will entail a lot of retargeting and building data-tracking platforms and content funnels, increasing the total cost, conservatively, to \$20 million. Twenty million dollars to teach every young Jew in America about Israel.

3 | *Courage*

Curiosity and content are necessary but not sufficient. For our communities to grow intellectually and spiritually we need courage, courage to confront the difficult elements—intellectual, spiritual, and experiential—of the ongoing Zionist project that is the Jewish state. Menachem Leibtag, founder of the Tanach Study Center, has become famous among Jewish educators for suggesting that the best educational philosophy comes from an Israeli construction-site sign that says, *Sakana kan bonim* (Danger, we're building here). In the place of danger, that's where we grow, that's where we build, that's how we make sure our intellectual and spiritual muscles do not atrophy.

Having engaged with thousands of young people in my work, I have found that we need to trust them more. We need to allow

them to explore, to get messy, to ask tough and seemingly dangerous questions, to engage in identity development. For example, many alumni of Jewish day schools experience Yom Yerushalayim in Israel for the first time at age 18. This can be a meaningful day for many reasons, inviting these young adults to feel the goosebumps from Israel's miraculous victory in 1967, to witness the celebratory elation of returning to their ancient capital, and to feel proud that the Jewish people have accomplished what many thought was genuinely impossible. But it can also be a complicated day, bringing into sharp focus the many difficult challenges that came with Israel's victory 57 years ago, for Israeli domestic politics and for many Palestinians, who refer to 1967 as the "Naksa," i.e., the setback. A yeshiva student who sings Hallel on that day with joy and gratitude but also sees antagonism against Palestinians in some of the marches and dances throughout Jerusalem — marches I've attended many times in my life — should be encouraged to explore those conflicting feelings. That is how we build lay *kodesh*. Here — *davka* here — we are building.

This kind of building takes courage, on the part of educators, students, and, significantly, funders. We need our funding communities to invest in digital education so we'll have the courage to continue these conversations. And we need our education communities to exhibit the same courage by providing us with the content and creating space in school curricula to focus on Zionism, Jewish identity, and the story of Israel.

If we provide this paradigm of the three C's — Curiosity, Content, and Courage — our lay *kodesh* will be armed with that well-earned confidence, not of the Dunning-Kruger variety, but one warranted by their depth of knowledge. *

ROBERT NICHOLSON

Religious Christians

*Imagine an America in which we invested
in the biblical roots of our cultural heritage*



THE GROUNDSWELL of support for Hamas in cities across Europe and North America since October 7 is a wake-up call for anyone who cares about the future of the West. The problem isn't just an emerging alliance between Islamists and progressives who seek the downfall of America and Israel. It's the inability of Christians and Jews to muster a serious response. The solution isn't more pro-Israel advocacy or better politics; it is a conscious return to our joint heritage in Jerusalem.

The most important reason the United States supports Israel's response to the Hamas massacre of October 7—and has supported it for much longer than countries such as Canada and France—is that American Protestants and Evangelicals have a longstanding

affinity for Israel and the Jewish people, an affinity that has long since spread to other Christian and non-Christian Americans. This is a matter not of apocalyptic longing but of shared values that must be reanimated in a moment of global crisis.



America's commitment to Israel, unique among Western countries, emerged from the worldview of Pilgrim fathers who saw themselves as a chosen people, called to settle a promised land. Unlike Europeans, whose political leaders were loyal to a state church, the early pioneers held the Bible above human institutions; indeed, many of them studied the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew. The result was a national culture that can only be called "evangelical"—a culture in which the Old Testament and its covenantal promises to the Jews were taken seriously.

Some have called this culture "Judeo-Christian," ignoring an ugly history of Christian animosity toward Jews. The Harvard historian Eric Nelson hits closer to the mark when he calls America a self-conscious "Hebrew republic." Whether it's the regular and accepted use of Bible verses in public speeches, the ancient custom of swearing oaths for political office with one's hand on the Bible, the prolific use of biblical images in public spaces (the deist Benjamin Franklin even suggested the image of Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea for our national seal), or the massive Museum of the Bible lying at the heart of our nation's capital, American culture is in many ways a Hebraic culture. It should be no surprise that Americans' special reverence for the Hebrew Bible, a Jewish book, translated into a special affinity for the Jewish state.

Yet times have changed. The peak moment for Jewish-Christian collaboration was 50 or 60 years ago, when the vast majority of Americans were united around the core assumptions of the biblical tradition. Today, that unity has disappeared. A 2022 poll by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion found that only 54 percent of

The deepest work must be done upstream of religion in the common realm of culture, led by intellectuals, educators, and artists who rally around and draw from the core mythology of the Hebrew Bible in a way that resonates with and inspires regular Americans.

American adults believe in “God as described in the Bible.” A flood of postmodern and intersectional ideology, coupled with aggressive anti-American activism, has left the U.S. a shadow of its former self. Our most urgent need is salvaging and protecting what’s left to stave off a total collapse of our founding culture.

Until now, the response of traditional Americans has been the so-called culture wars, a series of largely legal and political battles that aim to destroy the enemy before it destroys them first. Ironically, culture wars have raged for decades everywhere but in the realm of culture. Law and politics are important fronts, but the real battle is taking place in America’s soul. The crisis we face is ultimately one of the spirit. Only a spiritual response will do.

Note I said spiritual — not religious. In other words, the response must go beyond the four walls of churches, synagogues, and seminaries, transcending narrow questions of doctrine and liturgy. The deepest work must be done upstream of religion in the common realm of culture, led by intellectuals, educators, and artists who rally around and draw from the core mythology of the Hebrew Bible in a way that resonates with and inspires regular Americans.

There is no greater sign of America’s cultural unraveling than the resurgence of antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment across the

country. This revival is driven by two sources: first, by people of faith who nonetheless reject Jewish and Christian revelation as a suitable intellectual foundation for the country; second, and more dangerously, by a rising camp of religious “nones” who hitch their wagons to a variety of progressive causes that require the dismantling of biblical morality and the institutions upholding it. The upshot is that more and more Americans see traditional Jews and Christians as cultural and also political foes, and consequently they see the State of Israel less as a country than a symbol of the moral order they want to destroy.

What we need is a Hebraic revolution—and the sooner the better. The only question is how traditional Jews and Christians can work together to spark such a movement.



What will this revolution look like?

It must begin with a basic recognition of the Hebraic heritage itself, the cultural foundation that Jews and Christians share. And what is that heritage but the story of revelation at the core of the Hebrew Bible? The story of an encounter between mankind and the God of Israel, a supernatural being beyond space and time, who cares about His creation and acts in history through a chosen people to reconcile heaven and earth. Reframing, restating, and reinforcing that tradition as the key storyline undergirding our disparate religious systems is the starting point for any Hebraic renaissance.

Practically speaking, the best way to do that is through voluntary and nonsectarian biblical education—and, specifically, outside of churches and synagogues. The Bible has for too long been seen as a book of rules or prayers, when in fact it’s a book of stories that expands the imagination and forges a civilizational identity.

We need deeper study of biblical texts and a better methodology for studying them in community. With public-school education in shambles, and private-school tuition beyond the reach of most

families, why couldn't Jews and Christians work together to create a chain of affordable after-school programs teaching modern Hebrew through the study of biblical texts (immersively, ideally with Israeli teachers on *shlichut* duty), quite possibly in the style of *chavruta*? The Tikvah Fund's recent announcement of the Emet Classical Academy in Manhattan could be a model.

For years, Christian homeschool movements have consciously turned to the "classical" approach, steeping children in Latin and Greek. Yet the moral and intellectual basis for Western civilization was laid in the Hebrew language. Imagine the power of an emerging, Hebrew-speaking Christian subculture in conversation with Hebrew-speaking Jews the world over. What better way to build lasting friendships between Christians and Jews than by synching their minds in a shared language? *Kadima!*

At the same time, Bible study alone—even when conducted in Hebrew—isn't enough. We also need a new industry of Hebraic media that goes beyond the mere retelling of Bible stories, one that explores creative ways to embed the biblical imagination in books, music, television, and film. Why isn't there a Marvel- or *Star Wars*-like expanded universe based on the Hebraic tradition? Based on the success of family-friendly films and streaming series in recent years, there is every reason to believe that such endeavors would be profitable.

But the revolution will fail unless it bridges the gap between thought and practice. The biblical tradition diverges from the Greco-Roman tradition nowhere more clearly than in its preference for deed over word, for practice over theory. In that sense, a Hebraic revolution in the United States will almost certainly include a renewed commitment to Sabbath observance—not through coercion but from organic observance as young men and women rediscover the joys of rest as the best-kept secret of their tradition. In an age of technological fatigue, there are plenty of arguments for a day off the grid. Some more conservative pundits who sense the importance of Sabbath observance are calling for the reimposition of blue laws. A

far better solution is to inspire young Jews and Christians with the spiritual and practical benefits of the Fourth Commandment in a postmodern world, and let their collective example surprise us.

Last, the revolution must include a framework for sustained cross-fertilization between America and Israel, the living repository of the Hebraic tradition. Only in Israel does that tradition come alive. This means many things. First: It means more trips, especially for young people, to see the land where concepts such as justice and equality were invented. Second: It means more medium- to long-term opportunities for young Christians and Jews to put their shoulder to the plow, side by side, to build up the land for the benefit of its burgeoning population. Here, too, opportunities abound.



Coupled with stateside efforts at biblical literacy and Hebrew language instruction, such projects, taken to scale, will bind Americans and Israelis at the level of heart and mind. And, over time, they will gradually build a worldwide community that includes the burgeoning Evangelical populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The result will be a *de facto* “commonwealth of Israel” whose cultural and political ramifications might be greater than we imagine.

More activism on Israel’s behalf is warranted after October 7. But activism without a comprehensive vision will fail. America was founded on a unique reverence for the Bible and the God depicted within it—and, by extension, the nation that brought those things to the world—and will survive only if we the people rediscover both. *

ADINA POUPKO

The Jewish Mainstream

We have been focused on the Jewish periphery for so long that we have forgotten about the center



IT IS MY JOB to pay close attention to outliers. As the executive director of the Natan Fund, a foundation that supports early-stage nonprofit organizations, I spend most of my time thinking about the people not yet included in Jewish communal life. Who have we been overlooking?

What new programs, approaches, or organizations might we create to give these people access to Jewish life? Such thinking is why Natan was an early funder of LGBTQ inclusion, Jewish farming and environmentalism, new models of synagogues and grassroots communities, and Jewish arts and culture.

There has always been risk associated with this kind of work. In trying to create new pathways into Jewish communal life for those who might feel ignored or excluded, we risk neglecting the needs of the core — those already on the inside.

Being at war, as Israel and the Jewish people now are on many fronts, we must change our calculus in assessing the costs and benefits of this approach.

While we are at such a momentous and perilous time in Jewish history, we need to direct much more of our communal attention—expressed in organizational activities, public discourse, and funding—to the Jewish mainstream. American Jewry remains solidly supportive of Israel, as do most Americans. We need to draw strength from this, feel pride in it, shout about it from the rooftops, and ensure that our many and diverse communal assets are aligned in bolstering it.

I'm not suggesting that we put our support for the outliers on hold. But it's critically important to remind ourselves as a community that our first responsibility must be to support those already firmly in the Jewish, Israel-supporting tent. You can't expand the tent unless its original supports are strong, and recent events make it very clear that the "Israel-supporting" part of the tent needs to be shored up. October 7 reminded us that Israel remains under the kind of existential threat that we thought was long past, and the antisemitism and anti-Zionism that have exploded in its wake have put Jews around the world, including in North America, on uncertain footing.

In this moment, how should we think rationally about Jewish communal life?



Since October 7, rabbis are reporting unprecedented increases in synagogue attendance. Hillels and Chabads on campus are selling out Shabbat dinners for the first time in years. UJA-Federation of New York gained 30,000 new donors for its Israel emergency campaign, and Federations across the country are seeing similar trends—they are overwhelmed with individuals offering their ideas and time. The Federation system alone has raised \$750 million for

Israel, and this doesn't count the surely hundreds of millions more in direct contributions to Israeli organizations. Unprecedented numbers of Jews have responded to the horrific events of October 7 and beyond with love, commitment, and generosity.

Long before the events of October 7, the Pew Research Center's "Jewish Americans in 2020" survey found that 82 percent of American Jews said caring about Israel was an essential or important part of what being Jewish meant to them. Nearly 6 in 10 felt a personal, emotional connection to Israel. Now those numbers are even higher: A November 2023 poll from the Jewish Electorate Institute found that 82 percent of respondents felt an emotional attachment to Israel; 91 percent believed that it's possible to be critical of Israeli government policy and still be "pro-Israel." That's a lot of support—as well as a solid refutation of the notion that Jews think all criticism of Israel is antisemitism. Even a recent survey of Bay Area Jews, arguably the most progressive American Jewish community, found that 89 percent believe that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state.

It couldn't be clearer: All across North America, most Jews support Israel. That doesn't mean they agree on every aspect of the war or Israeli politics generally. (Why should they?) It does, however, mean that standing with Israel is the dominant position. It's an expression of pride in the existence of a Jewish state, allied with a renewed understanding that Israel must have security in the face of enormous threats. Underneath this lies a natural sense of connection to the Jewish people and our ancestral homeland.

This should be the story we tell about our community, especially at this time of crisis, and we should be doing everything we can to strengthen those telling this story. We must fortify institutions and establishments that represent majority Jewish opinions. We must state proudly and assuredly what we—nearly all of us—feel.

The corollary is that we must not allow ourselves to be distracted by loud voices from the Jewish fringe who are uncomfortable standing strongly with Israel.

For a long time, these two themes have set the tone in Jewish communal conversations:

- *We should meet young people where they are.* If they're saying they're more distant from Israel, and even rejecting Israel as a part of Jewish identity or peoplehood, then we should listen to them and create Israel-free Jewish spaces. That's just where the community is going!
- *Israel is the third rail of American Jewish communal life.* Complaints from rabbis and organizational leaders about the impossibility of discussing Israel with their communities often carried a subtext: These backward, reflexively pro-Israel people are behind the times. This dynamic has led too many leaders to avoid discussing Israel altogether. Israel's critics—and its haters—happily filled the void.

It's time for us to change our approach on both fronts. Jewish communities are full of people who are grateful for Israel's existence, who feel solidarity for its people, and who understand the threats to its existence—all while understanding the imperfections that need to be fixed. This should be our narrative—we should articulate the consensus with pride. We need to shift from meeting people “where they are” to providing them with opportunities to learn and engage and invite them over to where *we* are, where most Jews are. We shouldn't be so accommodating that we turn our communities upside down or compromise on core tenets that are existentially important to nearly all of us.



We must also pay attention to our future leaders. Rabbis should represent us and inspire us: We need to invest in a talent pipeline that produces rabbis who share the sentiments and opinions of

Debate about Israel is fine.

We will always argue about the thing
we love this hard and this much.

their future congregants. If Jewish leaders, especially rabbis, are afraid to talk about Israel, then we need to give them the knowledge and confidence to do so.

Remember the May 2021 letter signed by more than 90 rabbinical and cantorial students excoriating Israel for its “abuse of power and racist violence” and “apartheid,” and wanting to hold Israel accountable for its “violent suppression of human rights”? While those rabbis represent a growing generational divide, they still don’t represent the views of the majority of Jews.

As a community that now clearly sees the threats arrayed against us, we must ensure that we are attracting and training a cadre of rabbis who reflect the communal consensus, who are aligned with the Jews whose spiritual lives they will be responsible for.

This same line of thinking should pervade our Jewish institutional leadership. I have heard many stories of employers conducting interviews trying obliquely to determine whether a job applicant believes in Israel’s right to exist. From now on, let’s just cut to the chase. Say it loudly: Our institutions are proudly Zionist. Please join this awesome organization, and feel great about the place you work. Employees should represent the constituents their organizations serve.

This is the time to maximize our efforts to make sure our existing institutions are attractive to our existing members, and that they are able to provide strength and support in a time of great need. I’m not saying anything revolutionary. Debate about Israel is fine. We will always argue about the thing we love this hard and this

much. Inside Jewish spaces, let's invest our energies in making sure that the countless number of people who already want to support Israel and mainstream Jewish life find our mainstream institutions attractive, appealing, and accessible. Foundations, donors, and Federations should double down on their Jewish and Israel education and engagement portfolios, and seek new ways to support the core institutions that engage the most number of Jews.

Out of the horrific events of October 7 and the shocking responses to them ever since, a new opportunity has arisen. Jews want to learn. They want to engage. They crave connection and community. We must capture this moment by being there for those who are desperately reaching out to us, wherever that is. The Natan Fund supports innovation in Jewish life because we want more Jews engaged, and today is a good time to remember that the “more Jews” we might be missing are those right under our noses—those already deeply aligned with us, but who don't know where to turn because we haven't mapped out a route for them.

Devoting attention to the mainstream is not only strategically appropriate. It will also nourish our spirits to know that we are not on an island with our “traditional” views, but that we are part of a courageous and passionate majority who support and believe in Israel. This awareness should give us *chizuk* (strength) for the challenge. *

A Hindu-Jewish Partnership

Jews and Hindus are experiencing increased—and more diverse forms of—prejudice. It's time we forge a partnership to fight it



GREAT DEAL has been discussed about the failure of Israel's intelligence apparatus and political leadership to anticipate and prevent the horrific events of October 7, even in the face of clear evidence. I'd like to discuss, however, a more pervasive intellectual failure—the failure to recognize the threat that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs pose to Jews—and the opportunity this presents for American Jewish and Hindu allyship.

In the early days of DEI, many Jews and Hindus were instinctually supportive of its goals. How could there be anything wrong with supporting other minority groups in the service of a richer society? But both groups were largely blind to the theoretical underpinnings

of the movement, and further to its potential weaponization in the aftermath of October 7. Hedge-fund manager and major Democratic and Harvard donor Bill Ackman admitted as much in an extended January 3 post on X (formerly Twitter), including a trenchant and compelling critique.

I have always believed that diversity is an important feature of a successful organization, but by diversity I mean diversity in its broadest form: diversity of viewpoints, politics, ethnicity, race, age, religion, experience, socioeconomic background, sexual identity, gender, one's upbringing, and more.

What I learned, however, was that DEI was not about diversity in its purest form, but rather DEI was a political advocacy movement on behalf of certain groups that are deemed oppressed under DEI's own methodology.

Under DEI, one's degree of oppression is determined based upon where one resides on a so-called intersectional pyramid of oppression where whites, Jews, and Asians are deemed oppressors, and a subset of people of color, LGBTQ people, and/or women are deemed to be oppressed.

And Ackman is one to know; his undergraduate thesis at Harvard was entitled "Scaling the Ivy Wall: The Jewish and Asian American Experience in Harvard Admissions." It is specifically these groups—often described as "model minorities" who have made much of the American dream—who have ended up on the oppressive side of the DEI ledger, specifically on account of their success.

But the very term "Asian American" elides a great diversity of nationality and religious affiliation. A 2012 Pew Research study entitled "Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths" found Asian-American Hindus to be the most financially successful ethno-religious group in the United States. Forty-eight percent have a household income above \$100,000, whereas the second-most successful religious group by this metric—Jews—are at 40 percent. In the realm of education,

Hindus and Jews outstrip other minorities by an even greater margin. “Eighty-five percent of Hindu-Americans are college graduates, and 57 percent have some postgraduate education, which is nearly five times the national average.” Pew numbers from 2016 show an undergraduate-degree rate of 59 percent for Jewish Americans.

These statistics underscore why Jewish and Hindu Americans are not only left unprotected by DEI but are in fact considered to be part of the problem by virtue of their overrepresentation. But in an age of DEI, isn't it curious that, despite their ubiquity on college campuses, “only 5 percent of colleges had groups for Hindu students” according to a 2022 study?

What this amounts to is an emerging shared reality for Jews and Hindus, one in which they are subject to the hateful consequences of achievement—a paradoxical form of prejudice characterized by accusations of disproportionate wealth on the one hand and, on the other, inferiority. In August 2022, as reported by *The Washington Post*, the Coalition of Hindus of North America hosted a briefing, highlighting “memes and online social cyber signals referring to perceived ‘dirty’ and ‘scamming’ qualities of Hindus,” according to lead researcher Joel Finkelstein. “Many of the memes were manufactured out of commonly used tropes against Jewish people, using tilaks, swastikas and bindis to signify Hindu culture.”



In academia, antisemitism and Hinduphobia both draw from Marxist models that take aim at the Jewish and Hindu national projects, particularly vis-à-vis their relationship to the Muslim populations in their respective homelands. It is an ironic offense given that both traditions predated Islam by generations, only to be supplanted and persecuted by the imperial forces of Islam. In the case of Hindus, this persecution was especially present within their own homeland. The Islamic invasions of the Indian subcontinent started in the seventh century in what is now Afghanistan and then Sindh, moving

Unlike Christianity or Islam, Judaism and Hinduism have been mostly internally focused rather than driven by external aggression, ambitions of foreign conquests, or proselytization.

toward the Indian heartland steadily over several centuries. To this day Muslims persist in claiming property rights over key sites that were long sacred to Hindus before Muslims arrived. Somehow, progressive on-campus indignation about imperialism focuses only on its Western version.

This alliance between Islamism and progressive intellectualism is fragile and shortsighted because of fundamental incompatibilities in their core tenets. Bound only by their shared antipathies, they are strange tactical bedfellows in their quest for power, seeking to dismantle the prevailing social order and replace it with alternatives that are mutually irreconcilable. Their views on a host of issues—personal autonomy, religious freedom, feminism, political legitimacy, to name but a few—could not be further apart, yet together they offer a momentary mix of righteous indignation and sophisticated pedigree, religious rage and liberal credibility. But the commonalities between Hinduphobia and antisemitism reveal a deeper connection between Jewish and Hindu heritage in contradistinction to the violent Christian–Muslim drama that animated the Eastern Hemisphere for much of the past 1,400 years. Unlike Christianity or Islam, Judaism and Hinduism have been mostly internally focused rather than driven by external aggression, ambitions of foreign conquests, or proselytization. They have generally been on the receiving end of expansionist belief systems, conversion

campaigns, and religiously motivated crusades. They have a posture of mutual respect toward other faith traditions, free from any mandate from God to build a global community. Fittingly, we find ourselves today in a moment of flourishing Jewish-Hindu interfaith activities, including summits in New Delhi and Jerusalem and books by leading Jewish scholars such as Alan Brill and Alon Goshen-Gottstein.



The natural question arises: How should Jews and Hindus work together to face the current predicament? There are several actions to take that can collectively be referred to as an Intellectual Iron Dome—a set of measures and initiatives designed to anticipate and intercept these attacks on the culture of meritocracy.

Most immediately, Jews and Hindus should learn more about one another. Given the number of institutions of higher learning that host large Hindu and Jewish populations, it is rather astounding how little the communities interact. Introductions should be formalized by communal organizations both on and off campus.

Hindu and Jewish parents must stop sending their children to institutions that practice unmeritocratic admissions policies, and by extension donors must end their funding and affiliations. The two communities have contributed immeasurably to the intellectual heft of these institutions. Originally, we needed them to succeed. Now, we should create new educational institutions that champion meritocracy and genuine free speech.

A think tank devoted to Jewish and Hindu partnership should be established. In addition to finding opportunities for mutual thriving, it should analyze intellectual threats to each community.

It is also time to harness the powers of AI as a force multiplier in the arsenal against Hinduphobia and antisemitism. An AI-based system can be designed to monitor and examine trends in antisemitism and Hinduphobia online and predict problems

before they manifest. Such a system could be equipped to disseminate counter-messaging for threats to meritocracy, free speech, and the dignity and safety of Jews and Hindus.

A complementary system could create and disseminate indices that rate bias by individuals and institutions, to help the public make informed decisions in choosing vendors and organizational partners.

Just as the Iron Dome is necessary for protecting the citizens of Israel, the Intellectual Iron Dome is crucial for securing the reputations and identities of the next generation of Jews and Hindus as the custodians of their respective civilizations. Jews and Hindus owe it to their heritages to invest in such an initiative not just for their own traditions but also to safeguard the world from the regressive movement against merit. *

ANI WILCENSKI

Improbable Influencers

*Israel's social-media vibe can be
better than you think*



AFTER GEORGE FLOYD was murdered in May 2020, Susan Korn was outraged. The 30-something founder, CEO, and creative director of Susan Alexandra, a New York-based fashion company that offers Judaica-inspired clothing, jewelry, and homewares, took to her brand's Instagram page to show it, writing:

Today I feel...helpless, devastated, disheartened. I know this is a jewelry/bag account but today I can't bring myself to post or think about anything besides the news cycle. I've texted, called, emailed but let's discuss what else we can do collectively to create change, please leave comments below.

As protests and riots ensued, she announced on Instagram,

We are donating a shitload of money to the funds that provide bail for protesters who have been incarcerated in each city. Every sale moving forward will have proceeds donated, proceeds from every sale of the past too. Rise UP, speak, cry, scream.

Two days later, she was

continuing to put my \$ where my mouth is... donating and donating and donating. If you know of places that are in need, please share [in the comments] below. Today we are donating to organizations focused on black LGBTQ mental health and resources.

Over the following years, Susan Alexandra continued to wear its heart on its sleeve through a succession of social crises. In May 2022, the brand, which often posts first-person messages that appear to come from Korn, posted a photo of a sign at a gun-control protest that read “Save my life, not your gun.” A month later came its response to the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision: “Women’s bodily autonomy should not be determined by men who’ve been accused of sexual assault.” Later that summer, the brand’s Lower East Side store hosted a bake sale for The Brigid Alliance, an abortion-support nonprofit. Pleased that “so many of you came out to nosh, support and be together,” Korn was “proud to report that we raised awareness and funds for so many people to receive safe abortions.”

The brand, with products including “Oy Vey” necklaces and rings, Yiddish T-shirts, and other “Judaica apparel,” grew apace. In May 2023, Korn was honored as one of the New York Jewish Week’s “36 to Watch” for being a “designer of cool Judaica.” The next month, her brand’s store hosted another event: “A pride talent show in support of [the Campaign for Southern Equality’s] Trans Youth Emergency Project,” which “provides rapid response support directly to the families of youth who are impacted by anti-transgender healthcare bans in the South.”

Then October 7 happened. In a terrorist assault driven by age-old hatred, hundreds of Jewish civilians were killed in gun violence and women were systematically raped and brutalized.

Was Korn seared by the violence against Jews the way she had been by all that had come before it? If so, she didn't publicly show it. Instead, her brand's Instagram page shows that it held off for nearly a week before posting about the attack, sharing the following in the social-media equivalent of a Friday news dump:

We are donating proceeds of our Sacred Heart necklace, Star of Susan necklace and our Prayer necklace to @globalempowermentmission ❤️ good shabbos everyone, be safe ❤️.

For a brand with an identity tied to Judaica and outspoken activism, it was a curiously muted reaction. Who exactly should be safe, and from what? With no mention of the attack, the answer was left ambiguous, just like the destination of funds donated to disaster-relief charity Global Empowerment Mission, a nonpartisan international nonprofit. The Star of David (of which the brand's Star of Susan and Prayer necklaces are variants) wasn't even allowed to stand alone, or to go first in the list of products. (When reached by SAPIR, Susan Alexandra did not comment on Korn's or the brand's response to the October 7 attack.)

Perhaps Susan Korn knew what kind of Gen Z audience she had cultivated, and the limits of the kind of inoffensive oy-vey Judaism it tolerates. While Israel was still counting the bodies dead, burned, and mutilated, many in this demographic took to full-throated online advocacy that outwardly or implicitly supported the attack, flooding Instagram and other platforms with Palestinian-flag and watermelon emojis, screenshots of jihadi-lauding open letters, and footage of rageful yet celebratory rallies. Whatever the reason, Korn and Susan Alexandra didn't make a stand against the trend, or even publicly acknowledge the terrorist attack. When you build your brand on the back of trendy online sentiment, you don't

While Israel was still counting the bodies dead, burned, and mutilated, many in this demographic took to full-throated online advocacy that outwardly or implicitly supported the attack.

get to make a course correction when the prevailing sentiment turns antisemitic.

Similar social-media darlings such as Old Jewish Men and the self-described “Jew-ish” dating app Lox Club have built their brands on a certain mass-marketable expression of Judaism amorphously defined by something such as “color, humor, warmth and tradition,” as Korn described Jewish culture in an interview. No doubt these are fine qualities that can be found and embodied in Jewish people. But for Korn’s set, they can be both the essence and the boundaries of Jewishness: Larry David and bagels—and nothing else. Cleaved from religion, Israel, Zionism, and other things thought to repel younger audiences, they offer kitschy Jewy products that are derived from but not endowed with Jewish faith, history, and peoplehood. And when history returns to the Jewish people, these influencers have little to say.



Yet there are those who have stood up resolutely for the Jewish people amid the post-October 7 online onslaught. Unapologetically intense, these influencers have tried to gain a foothold for Israel on social-media platforms including Instagram and Gen Z-beloved TikTok. Many have responded to the attack and the ensuing spike

in antisemitism by pivoting their content and brand identities to focus on Israel, ceding almost all of the space on their pages to sharing supportive resources and educational content in an effort to dispel false information and help the Jewish state. Facing harsh online mobs, many of them have impressively doubled down on their efforts—to the point where, if you scroll through the informational-video-laden profiles of such influencers as celebrity plastic surgeon Sheila Nazarian or actor Michael Rapaport, you might not even know they have another gig besides Israel advocacy.

Their courage is commendable. Many creators claim that TikTok is “not safe for Jewish users,” and in January the app’s head of government affairs in Israel resigned over rampant antisemitism on the platform. The resources these influencers share serve an important purpose, circulating relevant history and critiques of popular arguments to their followers who are looking for pro-Israel content to consume and share. Their bravery affects their bottom lines, too: Standing up against the online mob often means losing followers, views, and even lucrative deals. In a recent interview, tech entrepreneur and podcaster Scott Galloway offered some quantifiable insight on the financial consequences of his support for Israel: “I got invited on a ton of [Israel-focused] podcasts in one week. The next week I lost \$980,000 in business.”

But as an Instagram-loving Gen Zer who has watched the online back-and-forth for months, I’ve come to the depressing conclusion that these facts and resources probably aren’t going to move the needle, especially among people my age. A Harvard-Harris poll conducted less than two weeks after October 7 found that 48 percent of Gen Zers side with Hamas over Israel, 64 percent say Hamas and Israel have “fairly equally just causes,” and 51 percent say the October attack can be justified by Palestinian grievances.

I’m skeptical that these sentiments are based purely on an appraisal of facts, however historically misguided those facts may be. As a friend once dryly joked, the currency of the internet is

“vibes,” and #FreePalestine has all of the good ones. Young people are arriving on college campuses decked with Palestinian flags and keffiyehs, opening Instagram to see supermodel Gigi Hadid falsely claim to her nearly 79 million followers that Israel harvests the organs of dead Palestinians (right after posting a photoshoot for her luxury knitwear label), and watching as the trendiest brands—including Jewish ones such as Susan Alexandra—either pointedly avoid support for Israel or side with Gaza. Particularly for a young person without a personal stake in the issue, siding against Israel and excusing Hamas’s terrorism can offer a compelling way to join the cool kids. (Such messaging power may also be the outcome of an unfair playing field. Calls to ban TikTok, the Chinese-owned app accused of using its content algorithm to put a thumb on the scale against Israel, have grown since the October attack.)



Israel cannot afford to continue losing this fight. Cultural products shape political attitudes, which Israel knows well: Its backers once led the world in such efforts, with *Exodus*, Leon Uris’s bestselling novel about the founding of the Jewish state, as an erstwhile example. While the recent success in America of Israeli TV shows including *Fauda* and *Shtisel* shouldn’t be underestimated, Israel might learn a thing or two from South Korea, another country embroiled in its own set of border disputes.

Over the past decade, American markets have been flooded with trendy South Korean exports, from skin-care products and food to such Oscar-winning movies and favorite TV shows as *Parasite* and *Squid Game*. South Korean pop groups such as BTS and Blackpink have come close to acquiring the massive North American fandoms once reserved for such homegrown talents as the Jonas Brothers and Justin Bieber. Also instrumental in this wave of Korean-American influencers are fashionista Chriselle Lim and esthetician Charlotte Cho, the skin-care entrepreneur

We need a third way, in which creators are empowered with the resources to share what makes Israel so special without feeling the need to launch polarizing frontal assaults on the anti-Israel social-media monolith.

who founded the popular online marketplace Soko Glam to “help people discover Korean skincare, beauty trends, and cosmetics.” Americans now have a historically favorable view of the South Korea–U.S. relationship: A study conducted in September 2023 found that over the past K-pop- and K-beauty-filled decade, Democratic support for using American troops if North Korea were to invade South Korea has risen by 13 percent, even though South Korea elected a right-wing government in 2022.

If Israel-friendly voices are ever to advance beyond our own echo chambers, we must move beyond the ineffective binary of either staying empty above the fray or leaning all the way into defensive partisanship. We need a third way, in which creators are empowered with the resources to share what makes Israel so special without feeling the need to launch polarizing frontal assaults on the anti-Israel social-media monolith. Even in sympathetic quarters, the Jewish state is often treated as though it is radioactive material to be handled with extreme care. While influencers jet to most any other country without one mention of its politics, ruling party, or history, content about Israel arrives with a series of disclaimers, throat-clearing about one’s politics, and a desperate compulsion to educate.

We’ve lost sight of an important, easy-to-harness reality about Israel: It’s not an unsexy abstract political concept; it’s a very real, and very cool, country! It is diverse, it is scenic and beautiful, it has

some of the best food in the world, its every inch is embedded with history, it has great scenes for everything from house music and clubbing to visual arts and jazz, the people are warm and funny and welcoming, and Jews and non-Jews alike who travel there with an open mind usually leave with very positive feelings.

On top of that, Israel also offers a welcome antidote for today's socially balkanized age, in which a decline in religiosity and communal connection has left Gen Z feeling more isolated and spiritually untethered than any prior generation. The country's unique blend of modern cosmopolitanism with tradition and spirituality can easily—and honestly—capture the imagination of those lost in a rudderless cultural moment. Many young people who pursue a feeling of purpose by taking up the mantle of anti-Zionist progressive activism may instead find a deeper call to action in the millennia-old search for meaning that permeates the Holy Land.

In other words, beneath the superimposed layer of disclaimers and talking points, Israel has a rich set of internet-friendly “vibes” and socio-cultural merits that exist entirely independent of the conflict. These hold latent appeal for a broad audience, even if that audience is too blinded by propaganda to understand it at present. This reality has been overshadowed by years of online anti-Zionism, which has lured supporters of Israel to play endless defense. But owning it may be the most strategic way to push back against the country's negative portrayal, and this can happen simply by treating Israel like any other place that has a lot to offer.



We can begin to change the online dynamic only by being honest with ourselves about who our friends are. At minimum, this means we should stop laureling those who, though they might have achieved nominally Jewish fame in mainstream culture, won't stand up for the Jewish people—even though they've vociferously picked a side when confronted with any other social cause.

Once we know who our friends are, we need to empower them with a new set of tools. There is a glut of educational tours to Israel, but influencers have different needs. They require tailored travel programs that unfold like social-media-friendly “brand trips”—the Gen Z social-media fixture in which cosmetics companies and fashion brands send influencers on enviable-looking vacations, during which the creators post glamorous content using the brand’s products or wearing its clothes. On an Israel-focused version of such a trip, creators would share truthful information while being encouraged to step off the lecture podium and show themselves enjoying the country, its rich cultural and spiritual offerings, and its people. This means less *Myths and Facts*, and more *neshama* (soul). The nonprofit Vibe Israel has developed influencer tours in this vein but suspended them in September 2023 because of Israel’s political discord. Other groups have hosted trips since October 7, but the online reaction to Hamas’s attack demonstrates that these efforts must be redoubled.

One example to follow is that of Ellie Zeiler, the popular Gen Z TikToker, who has been fiercely supportive of the Jewish state while refusing to cave to trolls and cede her entire brand identity to the issue. Her content in Israel (some of which is educational, but most of which features religious or cultural activities like Shabbat services or visiting the shuk) lives right alongside her more “influencer-y” content of makeup tutorials and vlogging. This dynamic communicates to audiences, including other influencers, that they can love Israel and still carve out an existence in trendy spaces without self-censorship or scolding.

We also need to turn these trips into launchpads for globally accessible partnerships. To better connect both Israel-friendly brands and influencers around the world, a new network should be developed based on the model of Startup Nation Central, the hugely successful innovation-diplomacy project that links Israeli tech start-ups with international investors. Israel’s standing in the social-media ecosystem could benefit from a similar platform on

which influencers easily find and develop relationships with brands that share their values and support the Jewish state—or wish to support the Jewish state but haven’t yet dipped their toes in.

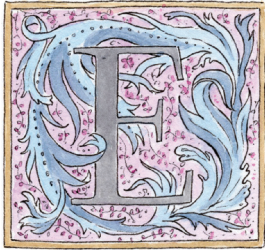
There are things to be learned here from Susan Alexandra—including that there is, in fact, a pretty big market for modern, colorful Judaica-inspired products. But these partnerships don’t have to be only for Jewish or Israel-related products. There is huge untapped potential in influencer-heavy spaces including fashion, beauty, and wellness, where there are many Jewish or Israel-friendly owners and designers, and where the items are desirable on their own merits. As influencer marketing can be expensive for smaller businesses, setting these partnerships in motion might require some initial external support. A supporting grant program for pro-Israel companies to work with pro-Israel influencers—and marshal the exposure on their platforms into eventual partnerships with mainstream influencers, thereby creating a pipeline that empowers receptive brands to feel supported in taking a stance—could pay dividends.

The status quo, in which Jewish brands and influencers either stand up for everyone except ourselves or preach to the pro-Israel choir, isn’t working. As voices supportive of Israel push back against the anti-Israel opinion monopoly, social media will be their steepest hill to climb—even though Israel does have the raw material to thrive in today’s hyper-online age. The cultural cachet of standing against the Jewish state often spreads online as an abstraction, a trendy political statement that is sometimes laughably divorced from the theocratic revanchism that fuels Hamas violence on the ground. To chip away at its uncool online identity, Israel needs to speak the language of and inhabit the same spaces as its online detractors. It needs a new crop of content creators who are empowered to treat the country not as a dangerous subject or an educational parable, but as a beautiful, meaningful, real place with challenges and lots to offer, especially for a generation of political trend-surfers who don’t know what they’re missing. *

MORAN ZAGA

Arab Modernizers

*Israel's peace with the United Arab Emirates
is a model for a new Middle East*



EARLY IN THE PANDEMIC, a friend of mine introduced me to another friend of his, an Emirati living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Knowing that my academic research is focused on the geopolitics of the Arabian Gulf, he figured it might be interesting for me to meet someone from the region—and why not make an international acquaintance at a moment when all communications were virtual, anyway? Majid and I began speaking over Zoom, and the bond was instantaneous. We learned about each other's lives, families, dreams—the stuff of real friendship. When we finally met in person, in 2021, it was as though we had known each other since childhood.

As I've come to learn from other Israelis, my experience of flourishing friendship with Majid is not unique. After the signing of the Abraham Accords, Israelis and Emiratis took to meeting one another on Zoom in high numbers. These remote introductions

that defined global communication during the pandemic offered a kind of soft initial encounter between the two peoples. Since that time, professional interactions between Israelis and Emiratis have taken on an uncommon level of warmth. One Israeli CEO opened up to me about how his Emirati colleague affectionately calls him a “long-lost brother found,” a striking reflection of the familial resonance of the 2020 Abraham Accords and its namesake’s two sons.

It all might seem rather counterintuitive. Israel’s peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are far older. Yet they don’t exhibit anything close to the 120 business-to-business agreements and memoranda of understanding signed with the UAE. As a point of comparison, it was reported in 2022 that Egypt and Israel were aiming to achieve \$700 million in annual trade by 2025. The United Arab Emirates saw \$2.56 billion of trade with Israel in 2022, accompanied by investments exceeding \$3.5 billion.

At 46 and 30 years, respectively, the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan have also begun to show signs of aging. The official reactions of both countries to Israel’s war with Hamas have been quite critical of Israel, with Jordan recalling its ambassador and Egypt publicly threatening to nullify the Camp David Accords. The UAE, by contrast, has exhibited a more balanced reaction. Lana Nusseibeh, a Palestinian Emirati and the UAE’s ambassador to the United Nations, has indeed issued condemnations of Israel’s actions and successfully led the adoption of Resolution 2712, which called for increased humanitarian aid to Gaza. However, her public statements have also included a dimension of sympathy and understanding for Israel, referring to the October 7 attacks as “horrific.” And the only Israeli ambassador to a Middle Eastern country who has remained in office throughout the war without recall or expulsion is Amir Hayek, Israel’s ambassador to the UAE.

Why? Because Israel’s peace with the United Arab Emirates stands on a stronger foundation of emerging shared values and may well develop into a true national friendship.



In 2016, the UAE government established a ministry of tolerance. The UAE's commitment to religious toleration is a function of a broader cultural evolution that has been taking place in the country for several decades. On February 5, 2019, over a year before the signing of the Abraham Accords, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation Abdullah bin Zayed announced a plan to create the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, an opulent complex containing the Imam Al-Tayeb Mosque, the St. Francis Church, and the Moses ben Maimon Synagogue—named in the spirit of interreligious dialogue. The announcement came during Pope Francis's visit to the Arabian Peninsula, the first ever by a pontiff, when he referred to the UAE as "a land that is trying to be a model of coexistence, of human brotherhood, and a meeting place among diverse civilizations and cultures." In keeping with the nature of the visit, the pope and Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb signed the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration. Worth noting is that despite the Egyptian heritage of both Maimonides and al-Tayeb (admittedly not exactly a philosemite), such an initiative was taken in the UAE rather than Egypt. Egypt has not had a chief rabbi since the 1972 departure of Rabbi Haim Moussa Douek for France and then New York. The UAE, by contrast, announced Rabbi Yehuda Sarna as the country's first chief rabbi in 2019.

Founded 23 years after Israel, the UAE is swiftly establishing itself as a technological focal point in the Arab world, marked by substantial investments in knowledge-based entrepreneurship. Such entrepreneurship cultivates a sense of curiosity about other points of view and an interest in learning from those who have similar drives. As is well known, Israel has long been recognized as a global hub for cutting-edge technology, contributing groundbreaking inventions and knowledge to the international community. It is therefore no surprise that both nations demonstrate pioneering advancements

The UAE’s formal ties with Syria have already proven beneficial to Israel, particularly since they allowed the Emirates to play a role as mediator during the war.

in space industries, renewable energy, and other advanced technological fields within the region. Even Israel’s entry into natural-gas production has not diminished its primary economic reliance on its intellectual human capital, a prioritization it shares with the UAE.

Another aspect of this cultural revolution has been educational. The Emirati government decided in 2021 to include Holocaust studies in its schools’ textbooks. In parallel, the organization Sharaka (Arabic for “partnership”), founded on the basis of the Abraham Accords, “is working to shape a new Middle East, built on dialogue, understanding, cooperation and friendship.” The organization has forged this path with its Holocaust Education Program, which brings joint Arab-Israeli delegations on an educational journey to Israel and Poland with the goal of learning the lessons of the Holocaust as an extreme expression of intolerance. The program aims to empower young leaders within these communities, nurturing them to become ambassadors of tolerance and coexistence.

As the first head of Middle East relations at the University of Haifa—a new position that would have been inconceivable a mere decade ago but emerged from the possibilities of the Abraham Accords—I can attest to the interest of scholars from both countries to work together. Nearly all Israeli universities have now engaged in some way with Emirati counterparts. The enthusiasm to join up with Israelis is even greater in Emirati think-tank institutes such as the Emirates Policy Center, the Anwar Gargesh Diplomatic Academy, Trends, and b’huth.

An Abu Dhabi workshop entitled “New Regionalism in the Middle East” in June of last year was a collaboration between four Emirati think tanks and Tel Aviv University’s Dayan Center, and was attended by researchers from the UAE, Israel, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey. The discussions, in which I participated, were deep, honest, and intriguing, tackling sensitive issues—such as the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Israel’s current right-wing government, and social differences—head-on. My conversations with female colleagues from the region were among the most eye-opening and empathic I have experienced in an academic or professional context; they left me inspired to work together with them in regional sisterhood.

However, the educational and cultural evolution within the UAE is also reflected in political terms in ways that present opportunities as well as challenges to Israel. Careful observation of the UAE’s foreign policy reveals that the Abraham Accords are part of a larger campaign to promote regional reconciliation. Beginning with Syria under Basha al-Assad’s leadership before extending to Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Qatar, the UAE has pursued normalization with Israel’s enemies as well. There are, of course, pros and cons to this. On the pro side, any initiative toward genuine regional peace might help create conditions of mutual understanding and advance Israel’s vision of being a country like all others with safe and secure borders. The UAE’s formal ties with Syria have already proven beneficial to Israel, particularly since they allowed the Emirates to play a role as mediator during the war.

On the con side, this collaboration might ultimately impose limitations on Israel in the future. Israel has constructed a narrative for its relations with the Arab Gulf states based on the concept of a shared adversary: Iran. Without this common enemy, history suggests, regional actors will return to traditional factional lines, and the current phase of reconciliation in the Middle East may prove unsustainable in the long term. Owing to the evolving regional dynamics, Israel must explore new narratives to reinforce the

legitimacy of its normalization with the Gulf countries, especially in light of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran last year. Needless to say, these attempts at reconciliation and understanding are unprecedented.



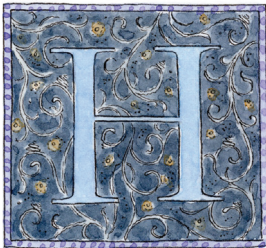
More work remains to be done. The question is, who will do it? It is an open secret that Prime Minister Netanyahu is not widely regarded as the most trustworthy partner in the Gulf. The strained personal relations Bibi shares with Gulf leaders are evident in almost all discussions I've had with regional counterparts, and in the well-known fact that he has not publicly met with UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed. In contrast, bin Zayed has met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog twice, including once during the war, as well as with former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. During Bennett's term as prime minister and Yair Lapid's as foreign minister, they initiated the Negev Forum—a significant achievement for Israel's integration in the Middle East. Under the renewed term of Netanyahu, the differences are widely felt within the Israeli government offices. UAE media portray the current government as “ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox,” and a series of actions and statements by the Israeli government had already strained relations before October 7. The saving grace is that these primary tensions are quite possibly temporary.

The wellsprings of connection between the two countries run deep, deeper than some of those with whom Israel has enjoyed non-hostile relations for decades. The Israel-UAE partnership is still in its infancy, on a complicated journey toward maturity that holds known and unknown challenges. These challenges require ongoing commitment and collaboration. The partnership has proven durable thus far, weathering a perfect storm: the largest military conflagration for Israel in a generation. What has become clear is that both countries genuinely value prosperity for themselves and the other. Is there a stronger definition of regional friendship than that? *

NORMAN J.W. GODA

French Jews

The response of French Jews to the post-1967 outburst of antisemitism offers lessons that can help us today



AMAS's October 7 slaughter of Jews in Israel and the Israeli response in Gaza have created a stunning backlash against Jews in the name of anti-Zionism. Episodes from the Holocaust such as Kristallnacht have been invoked, but this time it is primarily left-wing rather than right-wing action against Jews that we are seeing, whether in the form of mass demonstrations or violent rhetoric and sometimes violent acts on university campuses.

The warning signs have been there for years, and it is not my concern to recount them here. But is there a model from history for understanding what is happening? And, given the decades-long head start that our enemies now enjoy in the war of ideas, how might Jews respond over the long term to those drawing from a linguistic arsenal stocked with lazy, jargon-based, anti-Israel lies about

colonialism, apartheid, and genocide, all tied together by righteous fury and rhythmic sloganeering?

How the Jews of France responded to a similar outburst of antisemitic action and rhetoric in the 1960s and 1970s offers a template we should consider.



As it still does today, France at the time boasted the largest Jewish population in Western Europe. Even after the Holocaust, for many, being Jewish in republican France still meant not pressing community interests in the public sphere, where the universal aims of humanity were to prevail over communal concerns. Yet the Holocaust was a turning point for many, too: Jews who survived the Nazi occupation, especially Jewish members of the Resistance, fully supported Israel, as did the French children of postwar Eastern European and North African immigrants. They were French first, but it was Israel that they saw as offering a guarantee against another Auschwitz. As the French-Jewish intellectual Raymond Aron put it, “Religious or not religious, Zionist or anti-Zionist, no Jew can be objective when it comes to Israel.”

For French Jews, as for many others, the lead-up to the Six-Day War of June 1967 portended a second Holocaust, this time in the Middle East. Given the massed forces of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, along with the loud and repeated declarations of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser that the Jewish state would be destroyed and the prediction of Ahmad al-Shuqayri, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), that “no Jew would remain alive,” it seemed impossible that Israel would survive. As a result, Israel’s stunning victory, based primarily on Mirage jets purchased from France, was greeted as a miracle.

But the anti-Israel and even anti-Jewish backlash in France was shocking. President Charles de Gaulle’s November 1967 comments that the Jews “have remained as they have always been,

an elite people, self-assured and domineering” and that Israel was “a warlike state resolved to aggrandize itself” were stunning to French Jews. For Jean Daniel, a journalist and former member of the Resistance, it was de Gaulle’s reference to all Jews as a separate people that was the main shock. Were French Jews no longer French? French republicanism since 1791 had promised equal citizenship. Vladimir Jankélévitch, a Jew who had also been part of the Resistance, called de Gaulle’s comment a slander. Did France, he asked, keep England out of the Common Market in 1967 because the English were a “mercantile people”?

De Gaulle’s embargo on weapons sales to Israel, maintained by his successor Georges Pompidou after 1969, was a further blow, as France had been Israel’s chief supplier of military aircraft—particularly because the Soviet Union moved quickly after the war to replace Egypt’s and Syria’s air fleets. Worse, France commenced weapons sales to Algeria, Libya, and Iraq. Governmental comments that Israel had become a menace to its neighbors rubbed salt in the wound, especially as Egypt and Syria in particular were still bent on Israel’s destruction.

The renewed commitment of Israel’s neighbors to destroy it and the shift in France (as well as elsewhere in the West) to seeing the Jewish state as Goliath rather than David were bad enough. Worse was the emergence of Yasser Arafat as the head of the PLO in 1969. Arab armies could be defeated in the field; the rhetoric of the PLO was far more insidious. Its charter denied any Jewish connection to Israel, reducing Israelis to the role of colonialist invaders under the flag of Zionism, which the charter identified as “racist,” “fascist,” “fanatic,” and “expansionist.” Claiming all of former British Palestine west of the Jordan as Palestinian Arab patrimony, the PLO rejected any compromise with Israel and called instead on “peaceful and progressive” forces throughout the world to help in Israel’s destruction. Arafat and other PLO leaders were not, they said, antisemites. They styled themselves part of a secular global liberation movement that included Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Che

If the world was divided, it was not between the oppressors and the oppressed. It was divided into those whose rights to safety were respected and those whose rights were not.

Guevara, and Malcolm X, the last of whom said, “We are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.” Arafat looked the part, with his keffiyeh, his fatigues, and his dark sunglasses. In its anti-Zionism, the PLO was backed by the Soviets, who explained that the Jewish state had defeated their Soviet-armed clients only because Zionism was no local affair but an international, imperial conspiracy backed by the World Jewish Congress, which exerted enormous influence on American finance and industry. The whole toxic brew culminated in 1975, with the UN General Assembly’s infamous resolution that “Zionism is a form of racism.”

All of this made perfect sense to French Trotskyists and Maoists. Pro-Palestinian anti-Zionist organizations formed in France after the Six-Day War. They included university students who styled themselves as revolutionaries. Using the language of anti-colonialism still fresh from France’s ill-fated attempt to retain Algeria, these organizations also borrowed the legacy of the French Resistance, neatly turning the Israelis into the Nazis. French keffiyeh-wearing Communists complained of Jewish press control. “Palestine solidarity” events included distribution of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As Jewish writer Gérard Rosenthal put it in early 1970, “The problem of Israel is becoming a national problem.” Israel’s seasoned ambassador Asher Ben-Natan, who arrived in Paris in 1970, noted that relations with France had hit difficulties because

“there exists also in France elements that have suddenly adopted anti-Israel attitudes.”

How did France’s Jews respond? By asserting their Jewishness without sacrificing their claim to France’s promise of universal dignity. “The world,” said Meïr Waintrater, the editor of the Jewish monthly *L’Arche*, in April 1970, “only likes dead Jews. . . . It is impossible today to open a newspaper without finding an article [that] gives Jews advice—which curiously resembles orders—on how to be Jewish or how to be French.” Later, in 1977, filmmaker Claude Lanzmann asked, “Why must the Jews feel obligated after Auschwitz to speak in [polite] language? To prove that they are really French? This language . . . is from the time of Dreyfus! It is the language [from] before the creation of Israel! If we are to protest, I ask that we do so as Jews!”

The chief vehicle of the French-Jewish campaign was the International League against Racism and Antisemitism (LICRA), formed in 1927 in reaction to the dreadful treatment of Jews in Eastern Europe after World War I. After World War II, LICRA countered racism as well, monitoring everything from apartheid in South Africa to the civil rights movement in the United States to the war in Vietnam to the treatment of Arab workers in France. For French Jews, anti-antisemitism and the fight against racism were both part of the struggle for human dignity. LICRA saw no contradiction between opposing racism and advocating the safety of the State of Israel. If the world was divided, it was not between the oppressors and the oppressed. It was divided into those whose rights to safety were respected and those whose rights were not.

LICRA altered its view on de Gaulle. He was still the man who, on June 18, 1940, had called for resistance to the Germans in the name of the universalism France represented. As LICRA president and former Gaullist intelligence officer Jean Pierre-Bloch put it,

“We will never forget.” But Pierre-Bloch also noted publicly that de Gaulle “is betraying the Franco-Israeli friendship, not to [help] the Arab people, but to support the potentates who rule these people to their great detriment.” Understanding that the French policy encouraged Arab extremists to hold out for Israel’s destruction rather than work for peace, LICRA also led demonstrations of Jews and non-Jews in Paris and other cities against what Pierre-Bloch called “the scandalous embargo.” Meanwhile LICRA called for a Palestinian state—but without the PLO, whose terror operations disqualified it from any human-rights struggle.

LICRA’s writers, Jews and non-Jews, also tried to expose the antisemitic nature of anti-Zionism in their newspaper *Le Droit de vivre*. Didier Aubourg, who worked for Judeo-Christian amity in France, wrote in March 1970, “Of all the forces that threaten Israel, the Arab armies are far from the most fearsome. The most relentless enemy . . . is indeed antisemitism, the old antisemitism that no longer dares to say its name, but which, rebaptized as anti-Zionism, has never lost its murderous virulence.” Former member of the Resistance, writer, and curator Jean Cassou was more direct. Anti-Zionism, he said, was “a wonderful invention,” because it “allows everyone to be an antisemite in good conscience from now on.”

As for the PLO’s mask of humanism and progressivism, philosopher Anne Matalon noted in the spring of 1968 that “one would be justified in thinking” that the PLO “would recognize . . . the Israeli people.” Instead, the PLO resembled “a capricious child or psychopath” who insisted that history could be turned back. Could the PLO really pose as revolutionary? Jacques Givet, whose family was murdered in Auschwitz and who narrowly escaped death by jumping from a deportation train, said no. “Any apology for al-Fatah, however veiled,” he wrote in March 1969, referring to the PLO’s main group, “is by necessity an apology for genocide.” Unlike the anti-colonial terror in Algiers, Givet argued, “Free Palestine” was little more than a slogan wrapped in pseudo-revolutionary imagery to justify Israel’s destruction and the killing of Jews. François

European capitals are packed with pro-Hamas demonstrators who see the murder of some 1,200 Israelis on October 7 as legitimate ‘resistance,’ and American universities are dominated by faculty well-read in gauzy postcolonial theory whose statements against Israel would make French Communists of the 1960s and ’70s blush.

Musard, a member of the Jewish Resistance, identified Palestinian terror as “defiance of the most elementary rules of civilization.” It “strikes blindly in theaters, in markets, among innocent populations where their victims are more often women and children. It wants nothing more than ‘to kill a Jew.’”

—

The fundamental question that faced France then, and that faces us again today, was posed by Louis de Villefosse, a French naval officer turned journalist: “How is it that French opinion is not unanimous in its moral support of Israel?” Defending the right of Jews to live, he said, had never meant abandonment of the Palestinian refugee problem. The question had no easy answers. Jewish commentators and their allies viewed the problem as an almost deliberate form of confusion, just as left-wing organizations were quick to disavow antisemitism even while calling for Israel’s destruction. But, as Gérard Rosenthal saw in July 1970, such pallid resolutions against

antisemitism were not enough “to ensure the disengagement...of antisemitism from anti-Zionism.” The search for a just and durable peace in the Middle East demanded vigilance against any revival of antisemitism while demanding “the frank and open condemnation of racism under all of the ornamentation with which it covers itself.” And yet it was a frustrating exercise. Everyone knew that “Israel will live” and “Palestine will triumph” were not equivalent slogans; one called for life, the other called for death. The UN’s “Zionism is racism” resolution was, for François Musard, “nothing less than a step toward a new final solution.” Jean Daniel agreed that the Third World and Communist dream of an Arab Palestine was “on the same level as Hitler’s desire to exterminate all the [Jews].”

So here we are again. PLO fanaticism has long been replaced by that of Hamas, a religiously fanatic and far more openly murderous enemy. Hamas has shown unparalleled barbarism, and yet European capitals are packed with pro-Hamas demonstrators who see the murder of some 1,200 Israelis on October 7 as legitimate “resistance,” and American universities are dominated by faculty well-read in gauzy postcolonial theory whose statements against Israel would make French Communists of the 1960s and ’70s blush. Jews, once again, talk to one another in their own publications while academic and prestige publications such as the *New York Review of Books* weigh in with anti-Israeli invective, sometimes even offered by Holocaust scholars who should know better.

We must learn from the example of France’s postwar Jews. They dissected and flatly rejected the linguistic ruses of the day, understanding that the anti-Zionism of the Third World and the European Left was little more than antisemitism cloaked in a different kind of duplicity. They understood that if the French republican ideal truly strove for the dignity of humanity, it could in no circumstances excuse PLO terror, which strove not for human liberation, but for human destruction. They were thus able to locate the balance between a true antiracism that opposed injustice and an unwavering support for Israel’s existence. Most important, they found like-minded allies

while speaking up, calling antisemitism out when they saw it, and even breaking with de Gaulle, who was still a hero to the aging former Resistance members among them. But French Jews also understood that there was no silver bullet for antisemitism. The characterization of the Jew as everything from an exploiter to an oppressor to a colonialist to a racist made for a moving target.

This is what we need to do today. We must, at every point, take the rhetoric employed to make Israel seem like the villain and Hamas the victim and show why it is false — and what murderous intent it elegantly elides. We must explain why anti-Zionism is effectively antisemitism and show how Israel — in sharp contradistinction to Hamas — is fighting its enemy while taking more care of the laws of war than any other military in history. We must insist that there is no situation in which the way Hamas has conducted itself (and is still conducting itself) would be justified, even if the claimed situation were an accurate representation, which it is not. And we must seek every opportunity to impress upon the world that, in fighting against what are effectively anti-civilizational forces, Israel is fighting not merely its own battle but that of all civilized nations.



It will not be easy. But this, too, is not new. Jean Cassou noted in 1969 that the situation called for “extraordinary tenacity,” precisely because antisemitism was a shape-shifting creature. “An antisemite,” he wrote,

will always, in the course of his argument, turn to assure you that he is not an antisemite, but that he is against the Jews; another that he is not against the Jews, but that he is an antisemite; another that he is neither anti-Jewish nor an antisemite, but anti-Zionist; another that he is neither anti-Jewish, nor an antisemite, nor anti-Zionist, but anti-Israeli. He will swear to you that he condemns the crematory ovens but that he would like the complete destruction of Israel. See, we will never be done with it.

For Cassou, the fight demanded that “we have no illusions about anything or anybody,” because the enemy, antisemitism itself, “is the craftiest, the most ferocious of adversaries, and its natural weapon is bad faith.”

It has been 54 years since Cassou wrote these words. The fight continues, demanding, as before, extraordinary tenacity. *

PART TWO

FOES

*In every generation, they rise up
to destroy us, and the Holy Blessed One
rescues us from their hands.*

— The Haggadah



DANIELLE HAAS

The Human-Rights Establishment

Human rights are too important to be left to human-rights groups



RELEASED with fanfare at a high-wattage press conference every year, the *World Report* is Human Rights Watch’s flagship annual review of global human-rights abuses. For 13 years I was its editor, overseeing a six-month production cycle that involved hundreds of staff and resulted in some 100 country chapters. I was the only person in the organization to read every chapter, giving me a unique Afghanistan-to-Zimbabwe overview of their content and length. And every few years, noting its irregularity, I would raise the same question: “Why is the Israel–Palestine chapter so long?”

Not longer than a few chapters—longer than more than 90 percent of them, including those highlighting corrupt dictatorships sans free speech, repressive regimes in which women are second-class citizens, and countries that practice generational forced labor.

I tried again this July. “Is it so long because HRW invests more resources here?” I asked. “Thinks the abuses are more egregious than elsewhere? Has better access than to countries like North Korea and Iran? Whatever the reason, we should be transparent with readers.” But there never was a clear explanation, and after so many years, I did not need one.

The political and ideological creep in many NGOs has become so pervasive and deep-rooted that Israel has become their watchword of outrage, the focus of disproportionate attention, and the note to sound for signaling fealty to a human-rights movement that is increasingly hijacked by politics and dominated by groupthink.

This must change. For too long, human-rights groups have been granted a free pass to serve as society’s watchdogs without first proving they are fit to bark. Opaque, unelected, and largely unaccountable, they must finally be required to descend from their moral mountaintops and demonstrate in their own conduct the accountability and transparency they demand of others.



There have been signs for years that all is not well inside rights groups. In 2020, for example, it was revealed that Human Rights Watch had accepted money from a Saudi donor (whose company it had identified as having committed labor-rights abuses) on the condition that the funds not be used to support LGBT advocacy in the Middle East and North Africa. (HRW later returned the donation.) It also faces allegations based on newly released documents that it accepted money from Qatar in 2018. (HRW has denied the claim.)

It was reported in April 2023 that Amnesty International’s board had for months sat on a critical report that showed the organization had “not sufficiently substantiated” its claims from the previous year that Ukraine’s military had breached international law on protecting civilians by setting up bases in schools and counterattacking

Russia from populated civilian areas. The report judged that Amnesty’s language was “ambiguous, imprecise, and in some respects legally questionable.”

Then came October 7. If there were doubts before Hamas’s massacres that the moral inputs and the conceptual and practical processing are gravely awry in NGO functioning, they were gone by October 8.

As the only Jewish HRW staff member living in Israel over the past eight years, I was utterly shocked, along with the rest of the country, at the dystopian horror that unfolded from the moment the first missile siren wailed that Saturday morning. But over the hours, then days and weeks, that followed, a trauma of a different kind set in as I wrestled with the nonexistent, muted, or distorted reactions to the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust from my roughly 600 colleagues at the rights-touting organization where I had worked for so long.

Before I left in mid-November, I wrote via WhatsApp to one of the few colleagues who reached out to me following HRW’s clinical first public reaction to the bloodshed, which stated, “Palestinian armed groups carried out a deadly assault on October 7, 2023, that killed several hundred Israeli civilians and led to Israeli counter-strikes that killed hundreds of Palestinians.”

“I am at a loss,” I said. “How on earth can there not be one sentence that gives unequivocal space to what happened here in Israel.... One line from HRW to note and condemn the absolute barbarity would have been the least. But it couldn’t.”

It couldn’t because, as October 7 and its aftermath made clear, the outrage of many rights monitors depends not on human-rights principles, but on who is being abused and who is being accused.

These are groups that hurl stinging rebukes on a daily basis. “Heinous,” “abhorrent,” and “morally reprehensible” were descriptions in their lexicons before October 7: They were used to describe Salvadorian state abuses, Singaporean hangings, and the U.K.’s pushback of migrants. After September 11, 2001, Amnesty was

“appalled at [the] devastating attacks against civilians.” But on October 7, rights monitors lost their moral voice.

An “unprecedented operation by its fighters into southern Israel” is what Amnesty called Hamas’s mass slaughter and rapes. Others simply subsumed more than 1,400 murdered, mutilated, and kidnapped Israelis into such banalities as “military offensives” (Oxfam) and an “escalation in violence” (Save the Children).

Their responses reflected an escalation of a different sort that has been happening for years within many NGOs, where Israel has become so demonized that there is no space to see Israelis as victims, or to absorb nuance or voices that challenge their orthodoxies. In a conceptual universe where Israel is an occupier-colonizer-apartheid state, it is a priori the aggressor, regardless of the brutal human-rights abuses it suffers.

“There’s no honor in unlawful attacks on civilians. No matter how just your resistance to apartheid and oppression is,” HRW’s program director Sari Bashi wrote on X (formerly Twitter) during the October 7 attack, trafficking in the language of virtue rather than morality. Israeli hostages were mentioned only twice in the X posts of Amnesty Secretary General Agnès Callamard in the month of October; the posts did not call for their release.

More recently, in January 2024, rights groups had little to say about reporting that Gazan teachers, a social worker, and other staff of UNRWA—the UN agency ostensibly dedicated to helping Palestinian refugees—likely moonlighted on October 7 as kidnapers, killers, and RPG suppliers. Instead, many downplayed or presented the allegations as a mysterious human-rights whodunnit, as an adviser in Amnesty’s regional office put it:

The #US + co. chose to freeze funds to @UNRWA, the biggest provider of aid in Gaza, based on what the Israeli government alleged a tiny fraction of staff did. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t, we don’t know.

UNRWA apparently knew, though: It had already fired the staff members in question. And several major UNRWA donors were sufficiently convinced that they froze their funds — a “sickening” decision, wrote Amnesty’s Callamard in another X post, made because of the “alleged crimes of 12 people.”

Claims about the blurred lines between militants and aid agencies in Gaza have swirled for years, and a released Israeli hostage spoke in November of being held in an UNRWA teacher’s attic. Still, on January 11, just two weeks before the UNRWA news, human-rights groups were drawing a blank. “On the accusations that have been made against UNRWA,” HRW Executive Director Tirana Hassan told the UN, “Human Rights Watch has no evidence to give credibility to those claims.” Which demands the question: Did rights groups even look for evidence? And if so, how hard?

This same unhealthy skepticism of Israelis guided their response to the Hamas attacks themselves. Despite Hamas filming and livestreaming its own bloodletting, and the videos and survivor testimony saturating the media, on October 9 HRW still referred to the “apparent deliberate targeting of civilians.” Only on October 18 did it state with confidence that Hamas had intended to kill anyone, announcing it had “verified four videos” from October 7 “showing three incidents of deliberate killings.”



Because NGOs follow a course set by an existing narrative, “evidence” has relative value. When Israel finds Hamas tunnels beneath children’s beds, or third-party investigations reveal that Israel did not cause the deadly October 17 blast at al-Ahli Hospital, these findings receive scant attention compared with Israeli abuses because, in the minds of NGOs and those who work there, they are mere inconveniences to the prevailing narrative that Israel is fundamentally to blame.

If there were doubts before Hamas's massacres that the moral inputs and the conceptual and practical processing are gravely awry in NGO functioning, they were gone by October 8.

For instance, when the *New York Times* reported on February 12 that al-Shifa Hospital was a hotbed of Hamas activity, Omar Shakir, with a dual portfolio as HRW's Israel and Palestine director, did not feature this relevant information in any of his posts on X that day, or the next. Instead, his focus was on exports to Israel of Dutch fighter-jet parts and the release of a video clip from an Al Jazeera interview in which he paid familiar anemic lip service to Hamas and its murders (or, in his words, "the people who carried out October 7th" and "involved the commission of grave crimes") before returning to the usual script: "We're here precisely because of years of impunity for grave abuses, including Israel's apartheid against Palestinians."

The trouble is that divergent narratives make up the Gordian knot that strangles the region. Ignoring some while fully accepting others betrays an intellectual and moral dishonesty that is ultimately counterproductive if rights monitors ever wish to effect change through nuanced understanding rather than ideological preaching.

Here's a fact that lies outside the prevailing NGO narrative: Hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees were forced to flee Muslim countries after Israel's birth in 1948. They are not mentioned when rights groups and their staffers such as Shakir state that "international human rights law guarantees refugees and exiles the right to enter the territory they are from, even where sovereignty is contested

or has changed hands, and reside in areas where they or their families once lived and have maintained links to.”

Why? Because doing so broadens the lens through which the Arab–Israeli conflict is perceived, beyond that of Israeli “apartheid.”

“Apartheid.” The word has been constantly on the lips and in the posts of NGOs and their staff before and after October 7 in reference to Israel. HRW’s 2021 report on apartheid accused Israel of employing an overarching policy “to maintain the domination by Jewish Israelis over Palestinians” and accused its officials of committing crimes of apartheid and persecution. Amnesty followed suit the next year, citing other NGOs that similarly criticized Israel.

These groups cannot stop using the term because the “apartheid” framing is part of a larger ideological messaging strategy used by some of them to pursue “narrative change” that seeks to proactively shape public thinking and rhetoric, including about Israel. In keeping with this model, human-rights actors now focus on new allies and younger voices—including Hollywood players and social-media influencers—to circumvent traditional power structures. In 2023, Human Rights Watch signed on with a Los Angeles–based talent-management firm committed to inserting its messages into popular culture.

NGOs are therefore dual actors. As activists, they have a mission to ensure that the message of so-called Israeli apartheid takes root in the wider world. But as self-described witnesses, they are dedicated to rigorous firsthand research that underpins their findings and recommendations.

There are at least two problems with this. The first is that the long-form, deeply researched reports that were once the trademark publications of HRW have been in decline for years. Short-form written pieces, multimedia output, and social-media quick hits now far outnumber them, with related changes in tone, nuance, and argumentation, not to mention the absence of consistent fact-checking.

The second problem is that the roles of activist and witness are fundamentally discordant. The former involves a ready-made

mindset and imposition. The latter requires an open mind and exploration.

The reaction of NGOs to Hamas's attack laid bare the troubles of their split identities, exposing which of the twin roles has become dominant. Because they were consumed with being "Israel apartheid" evangelists, rights groups failed to bear due witness to Hamas's atrocities.

From here you get more than a hundred Human Rights Watch researchers rushing after October 7 to sign a petition related to a pending press release about Israeli hostages. Their cry? Not for the organization to be clearer and louder in condemning Hamas's unspeakable sexual violence against women or its killing of babies. It was to demand from senior managers that the hostage-focused piece reference Israeli apartheid.

It's no wonder that NGO staff members, both Jewish and non-Jewish, told me that, for years, they had raised concerns with managers and in wider discussion forums about antisemitism and methodological problems related to Israel work, only to face hostility at worst, inaction and indifference at best.

One described an anti-Israel climate so stifling as the organization moved to adopt its apartheid framing for Israel that the staffer felt unable to raise questions without being pegged as an apologist or a quisling. Another staffer was so worried about Israel-related research being distorted in the editing process that the staffer had sought assurances from a manager that it would not be. Another described pressure to talk publicly about "Israeli apartheid" just hours after the October 7 attacks and of having professional concerns about doing so summarily dismissed. It was deeply unnerving, all of them said, to be in rooms filled with so many colleagues who stayed silent after the attacks.

Most said they now self-censored because of their experiences. And over the years, I mostly did the same. But the points I made in an email to HRW's general counsel in 2019, after Israel was the only country mentioned in every plenary session at the organization's

annual New York gathering, remained true until I left. “The issue for me is not negative discussion at HRW about Israeli actions and policies. . . . I share many, if not all, of these views,” I wrote.

The complexity comes with the ease and weight of the discussion... the appropriation of Israel/Palestine as a way to express dedication to the human rights cause and left-wing credibility. . . . It comes with the very public forums in which Israeli examples are given freely in front of people who, for the most part, have no professional experience of the issue and almost no personal experience of Israel.

After October 7, at human-rights institutions nominally committed to acceptance and free speech, Jewish and non-Jewish staff felt safe to express their horror at the toxic climate only by resorting to encrypted apps and other platforms outside internal communication systems.



In recent years, NGOs have made a point to hire and integrate into their work colleagues with relevant ethnic, national, or other identities—for example, African Americans in U.S. work, or LGBT staff in work on LGBT issues. But not always. During my eight years working as senior editor for Human Rights Watch from Israel, to my knowledge, the organization included no Israel-based Jewish staff in its work on Israel–Palestine. Even I was there only by personal, not institutional design. I was hired and worked in New York before moving to Israel of my own volition.

My position in the program office, the division that oversees HRW’s thematic and geographic work, meant I could reliably be asked to handle material on all manner of global issues—other than those related to Israel. It was not from lack of trying. My repeated efforts to be involved, based on my academic, linguistic,

and professional credentials, and 17 years' cumulative experience on the ground, went nowhere.

The value of local staff who speak the cultural language and are relatable to those around them was driven home after the October 7 attacks, when a colleague asked if I would help to convince ZAKA—Israel's emergency first responders—to talk to HRW.

As collectors of the corpses that Hamas left in its wake, ZAKA volunteers were important eyewitnesses. But they were refusing to work with HRW because, as a ZAKA spokesperson soon told me, they did not trust the NGO to relay their evidence accurately. We talked for 20 minutes as two Jews, two Israelis, traumatized by the events of that day; he shared with me the terrible things he had seen and the fact that he was not sleeping. By the end of our call, ZAKA had reversed course and agreed to meet HRW researchers. It was the first and only time I was asked to contribute to Israel work. How many previous opportunities had been missed?



We know from a slew of recent examples—including the taciturnity of Hollywood and the Catholic Church over known sexual predation in their ranks—that power players are often less dedicated to moral probity than they are to protecting their finances, their images, and their own.

In 2009, Marc Garlasco, Human Rights Watch's senior military analyst, was outed as an avid collector of Nazi memorabilia. HRW's knee-jerk response was to vigorously defend him, claiming that his after-hours pursuits were purely scholarly. But Garlasco had already authored a book on Nazi-era medals, a 400-page red flag indicating that his excitement for all things Reich—including a leather SS jacket that he gushed online made him “go cold it is so COOL!”—was no passing peccadillo. Facing growing pressure, HRW suspended him pending an investigation of his hobby, but not without dismissing public outrage as “a distraction

The roles of activist and witness are fundamentally discordant. The former involves a ready-made mindset and imposition. The latter requires an open mind and exploration.

from the real issue, which is the Israeli government’s behavior.”

Even if one accepts that the odd Nazi-jacket enthusiast turned human-rights activist may be the sort of problem that can crop up, rights monitors have shown enduring ability in the years since to stomach eliminationist behavior related to Jews and Israel.

In the summer of 2023, Amnesty staffers met senior leaders to demand accountability after a board member of Amnesty International USA was found to have written and shared social-media posts that denied the legitimacy of Israel and lauded a 2022 mass shooting as a “#Tel_Aviv_Operation.” She also retweeted an image of a cartoon hand flicking a Star of David off an arm shaped as Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. “This land does not fit two identities. It’s either us—or us,” the Arabic text said. Leadership confirmed the posts’ authenticity and agreed they could be seen as antisemitic but said there would be no disciplinary action. It also rejected a request to issue a general statement condemning antisemitism, saying that to do so in the context of the tweets would not be in the organization’s best interest. The board member retains her position today.

It is hard not to wonder what the Zionist fathers of the human-rights movement would make of it all. Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-born Holocaust survivor, Zionist activist, and lawyer behind the word “genocide” and the United Nations Genocide Convention, died in 1959. Lawyer Hersch Lauterpacht, the founder of international human-rights law who drafted Israel’s Declaration

of Independence, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights, died in 1960. The Jewish-born founder of Amnesty, Peter Benenson, passed away in 2005.

But we do know what Robert Bernstein, who died in 2019 and founded the rights-monitoring groups that in 1988 merged to form Human Rights Watch, thought of the evolution of the entity he helped birth. He made it clear in a *New York Times* op-ed in 2009. HRW, he said, had “lost critical perspective on a conflict in which Israel has been repeatedly attacked by Hamas and Hezbollah, organizations that go after Israeli citizens and use their own people as human shields.”

Needless to say, he faced the same internal institutional eye-rolling and external pushback, vilification, and gaslighting that those who challenge dogma or who aren't deemed to be valid messengers often endure—that is, if they aren't simply ejected. Contrary to usual practice, HRW locked me out of its system shortly after I sent my farewell email detailing issues I had with its Israel work, without warning and a day ahead of my scheduled departure. In doing so, it sent a clear message to remaining staff: Speak truth to power, just not here.



It's instructive to understand that money and reputation are what are important to rights monitors, rather than a “team of rivals” approach of listening to voices that don't necessarily sing the same tune but that could ultimately strengthen their cause. Above all, this dynamic explains the futility of upbraiding NGOs to uphold their own standards and on-paper policies, and the inefficacy of proving they are unequal-opportunity accusers or antisemitic. Such strategies do not work because NGOs do not care—and do not have to. They answer to virtually no one.

These are enormous organizations. In 2022, Human Rights Watch's annual budget was around \$100 million, Amnesty's nearly

\$400 million, and Doctors Without Borders' (the medical-care NGO that has been notably unvoccal about Hamas's misuse of medical facilities) more than \$2 billion. Incredibly, given the size and influence of these organizations, their accountability is practiced primarily via self-regulatory mechanisms and internal rules and procedures.

Past critiques have shown that regulatory and legal gaps leave significant flaws in how NGOs answer to donors and the governments of countries where they operate, as well as in their responsibility to affected communities when their projects and interventions go awry.

Too often, rights groups have been able to swat away allegations of bias without meaningful proof or challenge. Too frequently, NGO issues have arisen only to disappear from the radar as rogue incidents, rather than being connected as points in a possible pattern. There are too many examples of malpractice that have come to light only because of leaks, rather than because rights groups practice the transparency and accountability that they demand of others.

Shamefully then, they must be *made* to do so. The push for them to prove, not just claim, their rectitude must be exerted from without and targeted at what *does* matter to them.

Needless to say, the media must treat NGOs as they would any other source: critically and with fact-checking.

As tax-exempt entities under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, U.S.-based human-rights groups should face rigorous congressional scrutiny like that applied to similarly tax-exempt Ivy League universities in December 2023. Groups based in other countries need similar governmental oversight.

Human-rights organizations must also submit to independent, thorough, external reviews of their operations, with the findings made public—and not only after a reporter happens to find that such a review has been sat on for months.

These audits should include investigating their editing, correc-

tions, and fact-checking processes, as well as complaint mechanisms, meeting minutes, research priorities, resource allocations, terminology, and organizational operations. Staff must be interviewed for their experiences related to workplace culture and management. (In nearly 14 years, I formally reviewed my managers once. Budget reasons, I was told.)

Concerned staff must speak out and join forces if they want to change the course of organizations they feel are gravely distorting their values. One place to start is for them to share their experiences so that the nature and scope of problems can be understood, a first step to forging solutions. NGO Confidential is a new platform designed for this purpose. The often-heard rationale that was my own for many years—“I don’t like what’s happening, but at least if I’m here, I can try to do something about it”—is doomed to fail if everyone thinks it alone.

Focusing on the warped thinking and practice, never mind the deafening silence of many NGOs on Hamas’s wanton savagery of October 7, does not abnegate Palestinian suffering or Israeli abuses.

Rather, pointing this out is to show that the failures of rights monitors before and after October 7 reveal wider problems so fundamental to accuracy and fairness that they ultimately collapse NGO claims to be reliable and apolitical when they serve as society’s presumptive moral ambassadors in the halls of power and influence.

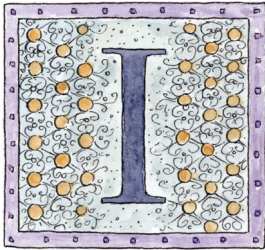
And this focus is about noting the dismal reality that the capacity of people to rejoice at, ignore, and relativize Jewish suffering has historically often been the canary in the coal mine, a portent of society’s wider moral slide.

As such, the corruption of human-rights organizations is a warning light not just for Jews and Israelis, but for all. *

DONNA ROBINSON DIVINE

Middle East Studies

*How did a demanding academic discipline
become a haven for activism?*



WAS RECENTLY TOLD a story about a Jewish professor of Islamic studies who, some years ago, was seen standing bewildered outside the hotel gift shop at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in a North American city. When asked what he was doing there, the professor responded in a mystified tone, “Someone at this conference is either brave or stupid enough to be wearing a kippah, and he just walked into this gift shop. I need to find out who he is.”

That there is a single academic environment in today’s North America where it is considered unsafe to be outwardly Jewish should tell us something. As should the statements of that learned society. On October 16, MESA released a statement about the unfolding war

between Hamas and Israel. After paying one sentence of lip service to the Israeli victims of Hamas's murderous rampage, the next five and a half paragraphs were devoted to a moralizing, accusatory, and error-laden explanation for why Israelis had been killed:

Past precedent has shown that besieging the Gaza Strip and indiscriminately bombarding its population and infrastructure kills, maims, and displaces Palestinians, exacerbating the structural violence of Israeli rule and does little to increase the safety of Israelis. . . . The majority of Gazans are themselves refugees from 1948; they are now contemplating a second forcible removal from their homes, in what risks becoming a campaign of ethnic cleansing. . . . At a time when our members have much to offer through their expertise to understanding these developments and to providing analyses that might contribute to slowing or stopping the escalation of violence, we are deeply disturbed by the chilling of speech and academic freedom on campuses across North America.

For an example of one scholar whose “analyses might contribute to slowing or stopping the escalation of violence,” consider Cornell professor Russell Rickford, author of a 2019 *Journal of Palestine Studies* article entitled “‘To Build a New World’: Black American Internationalism and Palestine Solidarity.” Speaking at a rally the day before the MESA statement was released, Rickford, professing to speak for Palestinians of good will, said of October 7:

It was exhilarating. It was exhilarating, it was energizing. And if they weren't exhilarated by this challenge to the monopoly of violence, the shifting of the violence of power, then they would not be human. I was exhilarated.

A “chilling of speech,” to be sure. On the same day as the rally, an open letter was posted online defending Columbia professor Joseph

Massad’s “right to academic freedom” in reference to his October 8 article lauding the “major achievement” of Hamas’s attack.

Academic scholars of the Middle East could indeed have helped people understand the historical background, the appeal, and the possible implications of such savagery, but the experts who were up to the task of taking on a valid and credible analysis were nowhere to be found, at least not on campus.

How did a demanding academic enterprise that requires serious study to gain language fluency and discipline-related skills become assimilated into a celebration of suffering? How and why are the scholars who are trained to practice careful, comparative explorations of the region’s history, culture, and politics overshadowed by those who have reimagined their intellectual labors as a form of activism?



First, there have long been attempts by scholars of the humanities and social sciences to demonstrate the importance of their work to society. A scholar’s ability to gain traction — even name recognition — outside the walls of the academy is widely considered a sign of success and a confirmation of intellectual status. Politicized scholarship can be an easy route to such recognition.

For Middle East studies, as for other university disciplines, the turn to political action is also, in part, a survival strategy. The sharp decline in college enrollment has generated financial burdens for many institutions of higher education, which face the prospect of empty classrooms and shuttered departments. Politics is expected to attract students to courses about the Middle East and to save the careers of the people who teach them.

Yet the enrollment crisis only began in 2010. Anyone involved in Middle East studies knows that the field’s politicization far predates this period of enrollment decline. Martin Kramer’s superbly researched book on the topic, *Ivory Towers on Sand:*

Because colonial power is sustained by a narrative, academics of the Middle East carry a faith that the right combination of words and phrases can reverse the direction of the colonial headwinds still hovering over all that is said and done in the region.

The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America, was published in 2001, and traced the roots of this failure as far back as the 1960s and '70s.

Essentially, there is a script to which activist-scholars subscribe. That script has two parts, one about the intimate connections between words and power and the other about colonialism as the starting point for the Arab world's descent into misfortune. The first part of the script, the relationship of words to power, was written by Michel Foucault and asserts that knowledge, and the discourse through which it is communicated, is a function of the powerful. One can identify who has power based on who controls the discourse. In his words, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it."

The second part of the script, the focus on colonialism, comes from Edward Said, whose *Orientalism*, quite possibly the most influential academic monograph of the second half of the 20th century, effectively created the field of Middle East studies as we have it today. In *Orientalism*, Said applied Foucault's theory of discourse to Western scholarship of the Middle East, arguing that such scholarship was an expression — and thereby an extension — of Western colonial power over the region. The natural

The failure of Middle East scholars to account for developments in the Middle East is not a bug but a feature of the field's ethos: an exercise in political liberation from the Western powers rather than an analytical understanding of the region's deeper dynamics and complexities.

and logical conclusion from this is that only work that assumes the perspective of the people of the region is free from Western colonial power, and therefore legitimate. Because colonial power is sustained by a narrative, academics of the Middle East carry a faith that the right combination of words and phrases can reverse the direction of the colonial headwinds still hovering over all that is said and done in the region.

The notion of a critical link between language and power is enormously seductive for scholars, many of whom are certain that their own discourse can help bring freedom to the Middle East. There are many problems with this article of faith, the most serious being that it has been shown time and again to be so wrong.

In 2011, for example, we heard cutting-edge Middle East specialists proclaiming the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square "the Arab Spring," marking it as the regional turning point for emancipation, reflective of events in 1968 Prague, and signifying that the Arab masses, like their Eastern European predecessors, longed for freedom and were determined to build it by their sheer strength of spirit. Well, this discourse turned out to be far

from powerful. Writing in *The Nation* in March 2011, Rashid Khalidi, who holds the Edward Said Professorship of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia, said:

Egypt is now thought of as an exciting and progressive place; its people's expressions of solidarity are welcomed by demonstrators in Madison, Wisconsin; and its bright young activists are seen as models for a new kind of twenty-first-century mobilization.... Before, when anything Muslim or Middle Eastern or Arab was reported on, it was almost always with a heavy negative connotation. Now, during this Arab spring, this has ceased to be the case. An area that was a byword for political stagnation is witnessing a rapid transformation that has caught the attention of the world.

Needless to say, the transformation was, ultimately, not so rapid, nor much of a transformation at all. Khalidi, like other Middle East academics, failed to note or was unable to discern what was happening in the streets: lootings, muggings, rapes, and kidnappings. Nor did anyone think it important enough to draw attention to the far more devastating natural disaster for the region: the locusts descending almost biblically on the wheat fields critical for providing basic food for the impoverished masses. As the demands for regime change made their way through Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the countries decomposed into their diverse ethnic, tribal, and religious parts, a virtual invitation for young men to raise armed militias and fight for resources and control over towns, villages, and urban neighborhoods. Increasing numbers of people—some of whom had earlier called for overthrowing the dictators—concluded that authoritarian rulers were the best of the bad options they were confronting. The terror of living under a dictator had been replaced by the horror of living without one.

The failure of Middle East scholars to account for developments

in the Middle East is not a bug but a feature of the field's ethos: an exercise in political liberation from Western powers rather than an analytical understanding of the region's deeper dynamics and complexities. With this ethos, the May 1948 resurrection of Jewish sovereignty in its ancient homeland is described entirely as an act of colonial aggression rather than the *actual* spring-time revolution that it was after generations of mandated Jewish disempowerment.

And this — the uncanny and beyond-ironic conflation of Jews with their imperial European oppressors — is how the intellectual failure of Middle East studies turns into no kippahs at the MESA conference. One reason for this failure is an unwillingness to account for the role played by the Islamic empire (i.e., the Ottomans) that preceded the arrival of the British and the French. The focus on the ruinous decisions of Western colonial powers, chief among them the creation of separate Arab nation-states, suffers from a bizarre circularity that anachronistically champions supposedly indigenous forms of nationalism (i.e., Palestinian identity) to fight against supposedly newer colonial forces (i.e., Zionism). But both are forms of nationalism. Are the master's tools to dismantle the master's house? Incidentally, such scholars also have it flipped — Judaism has been in the Middle East for thousands of years, Islam for 1,400; Jewish nationalism predates and in fact forged Palestinian nationalism. The title of Khalidi's most recent book is a perfect reflection of this inversion: *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*. Palestine came into (non)being only in 1917.

Paradoxically, this discourse of anti-colonialism has generated its own fantastical belief in a single pan-Arab nation across the region. Because the very notion of separate Arab states was a legacy of foreign rule, the borders themselves were interpreted

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as unmistakable evidence that the Arab nation was torn apart by a colonialism that blocked a future that could have been built around national unity. In fact, the story of nationalism, typically presented as implanting in Arab consciousness an uncompromised vision of unity and harmony, often served as a foil for minority religious and ethnic communities to anchor and justify their separate and particularistic solidarities. That is, the very assertion of a single Arab nation triggered serious opposition in the lands intended to be included and by many of the people expected to advocate or at least to endorse this aspirational goal. The political project outside of the academy to make this a reality, under the leadership of former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, was a colossal failure and was put to rest most ceremoniously when Nasser's successor signed a peace treaty with Israel. But somehow the embers continue to flicker in one place: the halls of Middle East studies centers at major universities.

None of this is to deny colonialism as an important historical factor in the Middle East, but to avoid the fixation bordering

on fetishism. It is a trap preventing scholars from interrogating the reasons why Arab dreams of independence gave way so easily and pervasively in their own nation-states to the same kind of oppression that had stained colonial rule. The effect of the discourse is to think that the colonial powers of yesteryear are ever present while ignoring the elements of the region that have in fact never left: tribal disputes, clan cultures, and Islam, to name a few. What's more, this Foucauldian-Saidian ethos has now made its way to other regional studies. (Rickford, for example, teaches in Cornell's American studies program.)

And here we arrive at October 7. When a repressive ruling Islamist group engages in cross-border killing, raping, and kidnapping, the inevitable reaction of scholars such as Rickford (who is not an Islamist), is to map the event onto the imbibed story, to think and speak in words that display this anti-colonial framework, to see Hamas as doing the powerful anti-colonial work that the academic discourse promotes. Isn't it more plausibly the opposite: that the academy is the handmaiden of the actual violent religious forces on the ground?

But lurking in the aftermath of October 7, there may be hope for scholarship. The polemics so tightly woven around what can be said and who can be heard on campus may be unraveled when the fighting ends and the accounts are fully audited. A trove of documents was dug up from Hamas tunnels; if and when they are made accessible, they will be impossible to ignore. They will disclose how Hamas maintained its grip on the Gaza Strip. Such material underscores the indispensability of scholarship that gives due regard to data as the foundation of an interpretive framework rather than the opposite: committing to a predetermined narrative because it is believed to be a potent symbol of a righteous cause regardless of whether it addresses all the relevant material or offers adequate explanations for events.

If this research is to be done, it will probably be done outside of the university setting, in think tanks and policy-oriented

organizations, where the incentive is to get things right rather than contribute to the conformist culture of an academy inflating its own power. That's where we should look for discourse. *

COLEMAN HUGHES

Black Radicalism

Antisemitism runs deeper in the black radical tradition than many realize



IF I HAD ONLY a glancing knowledge of American history, I would never guess that black Americans and Jewish Americans had ever clashed. After all, both groups understand what it's like to be a despised minority, both groups have been reliable Democrat voters for the better part of the past century, and both groups share the same historical enemy: the far Right. One need not be crazy to look at the photos of Martin Luther King Jr. walking shoulder to shoulder with Abraham Joshua Heschel during the civil rights movement and wonder how the relationship between these two groups could be anything other than a love-fest.

The reality of black-Jewish relations, however, has fallen short of that ideal. At the center of that failure is the troubling phenomenon of black antisemitism. The reflexive support given to Hamas by Black Lives Matter's Chicago chapter, which on October 10 tweeted a picture of a paraglider with the caption "I Stand with Palestine," is only

one of the latest examples. To understand the roots of black antisemitism, we must go back much further—before the realities of war brought the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli control in June 1967.

In April 1967, as Israel anxiously prepared for war with its Arab neighbors, James Baldwin published an essay in the *New York Times* under the title “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White.” The headline advanced a heavily oversimplified version of Baldwin’s thesis, but it nevertheless captured something true. Leaving aside the question of whether Jews are in fact white (the Nazis certainly didn’t think so, and there are many unambiguously non-white Jews—for instance, Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews), it is nevertheless true that black Americans see Jews as white. And to the extent that there is a deep well of anti-white sentiment in the black community, that sentiment gets grafted onto Jews.



But there is much more to black antisemitism than that. In his essay, Baldwin pointed out that during his youth in Harlem, he mostly encountered Jews in roles of power and authority relative to him: his landlord, his grocer, his butcher, etc. As a result, Baldwin claimed, one source of black antisemitism was the natural friction that results when one ethnic group operates the lion’s share of businesses in an area mostly populated by a different group. In other words, it wasn’t because Jews were Jewish: *Any* group overrepresented among landlords and shopkeepers would have been hated. One can look, for instance, at the targeting of Korean-owned stores in inner-city race riots to find support for this theory.

That said, Baldwin’s point explains less than it appears to. For one thing, black-Jewish tensions in Harlem were a local and temporary reality. They therefore cannot explain what has become a national and long-lasting phenomenon. Jews may have been landlords in Harlem during the early and mid-20th century—Harlem was, after all, a Jewish (and Italian) neighborhood long before blacks arrived—but

blacks have resented Jews all across the nation, long past the time when Jews owned many buildings and businesses in Harlem. When I lived in Hamilton Heights and Harlem between 2016 and 2020, my landlord was Dominican, and all the delis were run by Yemenis.

One underappreciated source of black antisemitism omitted in Baldwin's essay is the Nation of Islam (NOI). NOI is a syncretic blend of Islam, black nationalism, and a sort of copy-paste of the Jewish story, but with black Americans swapped in for Jews as the "chosen people"—an aspect NOI shares with the Black Hebrew Israelites. As Elijah Muhammad put it in his book *Message to the Black Man in America*: "A Savior is born, not to save the Jews but to save the poor Negro."

Though NOI's founding scriptures contained more white-hatred than Jew-hatred, it did not take long for Jew-hatred to become central to NOI. In 1960, the great civil rights leader Bayard Rustin pressed Malcolm X, then a spokesperson for the NOI, on allegations that Elijah Muhammad had singled out Jews as "exploiters." In one of the least convincing defenses ever made, Malcolm replied:

I don't think you can find an article where he has ever pointed out the Jew as an exploiter of the black man. He speaks of the exploiter. Period. He doesn't break it down in terms of Frenchmen or Englishmen or a Jew or a German. He speaks of the exploiter *and sometimes the man who is the most guilty of exploitation will think you are pointing the finger at him.* [Emphasis added.]

Any doubt about NOI's antisemitism was put to rest when Louis Farrakhan assumed leadership of the organization in 1981. Farrakhan called Hitler "a very great man" and Judaism "a gutter religion." He holds Jews responsible for funding both the American slave trade and the Holocaust. "Jews have been so bad at politics they lost half their population in the Holocaust," Farrakhan said. "They thought they could trust in Hitler, and they helped him get the Third Reich on the road."

Jewish Americans are proof that it is possible to succeed economically even when history has thrown every possible obstacle in your way.

Though Farrakhan has appropriately been deeply criticized by organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center, he has not been canceled to the extent that he should be—and certainly not to the extent he would be if he were a white person with the same views. For instance, three of the co-chairs of the 2018 Women’s March—Linda Sarsour, Carmen Perez, and Tamika Mallory—had ties to Farrakhan, despite his regressive views on the role of women in society. Indeed, the *New York Times* reported that NOI members were involved in providing security for some of the marches. As a result, the Women’s March refused to dissociate itself from Farrakhan for almost a year, until a particularly fiery Farrakhan speech denouncing the “satanic Jews” finally elicited a mealy-mouthed Facebook post.

While NOI’s official membership has never constituted a large part of the black community, its influence has far outstripped its official numbers because of its popularity with rappers. NOI’s and specifically Farrakhan’s teachings formed the waters in which rappers of a certain generation, from Jay-Z and Snoop Dogg to Ice Cube and of course Ye (formerly Kanye West), swam. As a result, the antisemitism inherent in NOI has found a bullhorn in hip-hop lyrics and hip-hop culture more broadly.

But the true source of black antisemitism lies deeper than ethnic tensions in Harlem or the influence of NOI. At bottom, black antisemitism has to do with the story that black Americans tell ourselves about who we are. Every ethnic group has a dominant story—a story as sacred to its members as any religious catechism.

The dominant black American story runs as follows: We are the only Americans who came here not by choice, but in chains. And though the country has moved past slavery, legalized white supremacy, and open discrimination, we remain a disproportionately poor and downtrodden people as a result of our past oppression. But for that history of oppression, we would be thriving.

A typical challenge to this story is the “model minority” argument: namely, the fact that many immigrant groups have arrived on America’s shores penniless and despised but have nonetheless risen up the ladder within a few generations. Why, then, can’t black Americans do the same? The typical response is that those groups were not trailing centuries of brutal discrimination and therefore did not have to climb as steep a hill. And with most groups—say, the Italians and the Irish—this response seems convincing enough.

But then there is the troubling case of Jewish Americans. The trials and tribulations of the Jewish people are so numerous, so well documented, and so undeniable that this response rings somewhat hollow. Jews have indeed had to climb the steepest of hills. But to acknowledge Jewish success in the face of that history, and to do so without resorting to odious conspiracy theories, would require a reconsideration of the black American story. In other words, Jewish Americans are proof that it is possible to succeed economically even when history has thrown every possible obstacle in your way. So, more than any other “model minority,” Jewish Americans, thanks to their success, present a serious challenge to the story that black Americans tell ourselves—a challenge that is not so easily rebutted.



In a sense, the particular *way* in which a black individual might arrive at antisemitism is secondary. Ultimately, they all draw energy from the same source: a desire to preserve the black American story in its current form, and a knee-jerk rejection of any perceived challenge to it. Given a choice between rewriting our own story and

rewriting the Jewish story, many black Americans choose the latter, by downplaying or simply denying Jewish history. A recent YouGov/Economist poll asked Americans whether the Holocaust was a myth. Eighty-two percent of whites and 71 percent of Hispanics said no. Sadly, only 55 percent of blacks said the same.

Somewhat less abhorrent than Holocaust denial has been the falsehood, popular among black Americans, that Jews must have arrived in America with money to begin with. In his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, Martin Luther King Jr. lamented the fact that “Negroes nurture a persisting myth that the Jews of America attained social mobility and status solely because they had money,” and that this myth “encourages anti-Semitism.” The truth of the matter, he offered, was that “Jews progressed because they possessed a tradition of education combined with social and political action.”

As in so many areas, King sketched a healthier path forward. Ultimately, he advised: “Without overlooking the towering differences between the Negro and Jewish experiences, the lesson of Jewish mass involvement in social and political action and education is worthy of *emulation*” (emphasis added).

In 2023, it would be heretical to suggest that black Americans should in any way emulate Jewish Americans. But when you live in crazy times, perhaps common sense comes across as heresy. *

JOSEF JOFFE

Western Guilt

The beleaguered State of Israel has become the scapegoat that must bear the sins of the West—imperialism, colonialism, and oppression



HE GERMANS will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz,” runs a bizarre quip ascribed to the Israeli psychiatrist Zvi Rex. To deconstruct it, consult Dr. Freud. “A convenient way to dispatch guilt,” he might expound, “is to project it onto your victim”—like a schoolyard bully who huffs that the fight started when the other guy hit back.

Guilt-swapping is precisely what Hamas’s cheerleaders around the world did even before Israel struck back after October 7. Hamas had tortured, raped, and murdered 1,200 Israelis. Instead of condolences, Israel reaped a global orgy of antisemitism, be it masked or overt, that also engulfed Jews everywhere, especially university students (demonstrating that higher education is no antidote for frenzy). It was a perfect reversal of cause and effect.

To plumb the Freudian mechanism, go back to postwar Germany, whose Nazi precursor had committed the crime of all crimes. After total defeat and “reeducation,” antisemitism was out. Democracy established strong roots, and philosemitism became the creed of the land. The government paid billions in restitution to the survivors of the Holocaust and the young state of Israel. At Yad Vashem, German officials from the president down would bow their head to the 6 million dead. The arms trade flourished; German-made U-boats are now one leg of Israel’s nuclear triad.

Yet the moral burden stuck, and so *Schuldabwehr* — “repelling guilt” — crept into contrition and atonement. By the first intifada, in 1987, Germans were telling themselves: “Israel is doing to the Palestinians what we did to the Jews.” “They are conducting a *Vernichtungskrieg*” — Nazispeak for a war of annihilation. “Gaza is like the Warsaw Ghetto.” “Haven’t the Jews learned from the past?” Auschwitz, then, was a kind of reform school.

Freud might muse: “Such parallels betray projection. Culpability continued to chafe, and, eventually, Germans sought relief by shifting it onto the victims.” Steeped in the Torah, Freud would add: “Three thousand years before I set up my couch, the Jews invented the scapegoat in Leviticus who ‘shall bear all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.’” But he would explain: “Such displacement, as I call it, spelled vast moral progress — no more human sacrifice to appease the Gods.”



There is no such advance in our days as we run through the third iteration of Jew-hatred.

The first chapter was written by Christianity. Jews were charged with killing God’s son, desecrating the Host, and committing ritual murder. A bitter Jewish joke makes the point. When a little girl was killed just before Passover, the shtetl’s Jews covered in the

shul awaiting an imminent massacre. Suddenly, the rabbi barges in, jubilating, “I have wonderful news. The girl was not Christian, but Jewish.”

The second chapter was authored by Hitler, who went from faith to race, fingering Jews as cosmic enemies of Germany and the world. Once, Jews poisoned the wells; now it is the bloodstream of the Aryans. They had to be quashed like super-deadly bugs.

Chapter 3 unfolds as we speak. “From the river to the sea,” a classic Palestinian refrain, sounds like a geographic reference, but its thrust is ethnic cleansing and extinction. Chanting this mantra, the crowds on Western campuses and squares haven’t read the 1988 charter of its leading exponent, Hamas, which in the name of Allah orders Muslims to kill Jews wherever they hide. Nor do the infuriated know the venom continually oozing from the language of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Tehran. “Israel remains a foreign body,” thundered Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah years ago, as if cribbing from *Mein Kampf*. Before the International Criminal Court, Israel stands accused of Nazi-like “genocide.” Hamas official Ghazi Hamad: “We must remove that country, because it constitutes a . . . catastrophe for the Arab and Islamic nation.” As for the October 7 massacre, we will do it “again and again.” And “everything is justified.”

Prefaced by the 1975 UN General Assembly “Zionism is racism” resolution, the new chapter lays out the rage across the West. A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. So behold a poster held up at a rally outside the CUNY chancellor’s office on December 5, 2023. It screams: “Call It What It Is: Genocide, Occupation, Imperialism, White Supremacy, Ethnic Cleansing!” It condenses a standard litany into 12 words. Apropos of “genocide”: How did the 750,000 Palestinians fleeing the 1948 Arab–Israel war grow into 5.3 millions today?



These privileged alumni and undereducated students were spewing what they had learned in school for a generation before October 7.

The gist is Western guilt, and it must be exorcised by laying it first and foremost on the colonialist state of Israel, i.e., the Jews.

The short take: The West is the root of all evil, and racist Israel is its spearhead.

Back in the classroom, students had been taught a hoary amalgam of 20th-century German critical theory and French deconstructionism, spruced up by American critical race theory. Taught from Stockton, Calif., to Stockholm, Sweden, the doctrine has at its core white supremacy, which must be crushed. The gist is Western guilt, and it must be exorcised by laying it first and foremost on the colonialist state of Israel, i.e., the Jews.

This is history as agenda. Yet imperialism is as old as mankind, not a matter of pigmentation or faith. The chariot preceded the tank, and the scimitar the machine gun. Here is a short list of history's neglected culprits: Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Persia in antiquity, conquerors all. The Arabs grabbed North Africa and Iberia. The Mongols built a murderous empire ranging from the Danube to the Pacific. The Aztec version antedates Spain's conquistadors. China ruled Vietnam for a thousand years. The Turks oppressed the Arabs (who practiced the same faith) for 400 years, bringing down a towering culture that ranged from Baghdad to Alexandria.

The West got into the act only in the 16th century. Since then, it has had a lot to atone for. How to expiate these sins, which are not the White Man's monopoly? It cannot be done by expelling him from the Americas and Oceania by the tens of million. But Israel makes for a nice whipping boy. As to the United States, give back the Southwest to Mexico, including progressive Hollywood? God forbid! Depopulate woke Portland and Seattle where Native

A moral chasm continues to yawn. Israel does not deliberately kill civilians serving as human shields, which is proscribed by the Geneva Conventions. Nor does the IDF mutilate women. Hamas celebrates such mayhem.

Americans once roamed? That would be “ethnic self-cleansing,” wouldn’t it? When thought through, such is the gruesome logic of rehabilitation with its unbearable price.

Real absolution would entail a *mea maxima culpa* and astronomical amends. It is a thousand times more economical to heap guilt on a handy scapegoat. This is a faraway small country peopled by the heirs of those slaughtered in the Holocaust and driven from their ancestral homes in the Islamic world. By “redirection,” a Freudian defense mechanism, progressives can keep what their ancestors took—dare we say “colonized?”—and still shine forth as chastened sinners.



Where slavery and Jim Crow once ruled, penance now comes with bargain-basement price tags. Topple Columbus and Jefferson statues. Adorn university buildings with plaques ruefully commemorating the expropriation of the Indigenous. Blot out the name of racist Woodrow Wilson at Princeton’s School of Public and International Affairs. Ban native garb from Halloween parties. Rewrite American classics such as *Huckleberry Finn*. Pursue affirmative action, which discriminates against high-performing Asian Americans for being white-adjacent. In class, sort by race and make the “oppressors”

fess up to their “privilege.” If they don’t, an army of DEI bureaucrats will set them straight.

Dr. Freud would spear ersatz contrition on the cheap. For an illustration, let’s steer him to the current course catalogue of Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Search for “colonialism“ with prefixes such as “neo-” and “post-,” plus such neologisms as “decoloniality.” That yields three-score hits, not counting the professional schools. Then multiply by a thousand lesser institutions, which tout indoctrination as scholarship. For a typical example, see the University of Washington, where students are exhorted to learn about “racism, imperialism, and settler colonialism.”



So much for the agitprop. Now to the real thing. The Middle East game is not about truth, but power, and hence from the darkened halls of academia to realpolitik. Previous generations of the Enlightened might be forgiven for extolling the totalitarians of the 20th century, communist and fascist. Think Jean-Paul Sartre or George Bernard Shaw. But present-day intellectuals and pundits, who have seen the consequences, should know better. They denounce Israel as racist colonizer and paint Harvard’s defrocked president Claudine Gay as a victim of Jewish money and Republican machinations. They do not fathom the real stakes.

Hamas knew that mass murder would bring down dreadful retaliation—indeed, they *wanted* it. Not to worry. Gazan dead were worth a hundred times more on the world’s screens than slain Israelis. Gaza’s dead would bring down the world’s wrath on the “Zionist entity” and soon haul in billions meant for Gaza’s reconstruction, but destined for tunnels and rockets. The more corpses, the better. “We are proud to sacrifice martyrs,” Hamas politburo member Ghazi Hamad trumpeted.

Keep dissecting the strategic calculus. Hezbollah in the north and Houthis way down south would open up two more fronts—as they

did. The third front is the West Bank, where Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad mastermind the violence. Farther afield, dismantle the Abraham Accords, designed to broaden Israel's peace with Arab states.

Cui bono? the Romans asked. It is Iran. Pursuing cold-eyed interest, these saintly revolutionaries have trained and equipped their surrogates in Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen. The real mark is the United States, the region's guardian and Israel's only ally of weight. Target the "Little Satan" to avoid direct confrontation with the superpower "Great Satan." That story is too complicated to be taught in U.S. humanities and social science departments — and in European schools as well. Far worse, it would demolish the postcolonialist narrative of exclusive Western and Israeli guilt.

So what looks like a morality play is like *Richard III* or *Macbeth*: a deadly drama about power, ambition, and greed. Israel and Jewish billionaires star on the new stage. Yet this is but chapter 3 in the annals of anti-Judaism, with Israel and Jewish students serving as targets of guilt projection.



Israel is not blameless, as states never are. Nasties like Security Minister Ben-Gvir despise what is best in the Jewish tradition, which teaches to "love thy neighbor," as copy-catted by Christianity. So Gvir proposes ethnic cleansing: Out with the Gazans, in with Israeli settlers! That is just one disheartening example among many. They do not make Israel "a light unto the nations."

Yet when everything is tallied, a moral chasm continues to yawn. Israel does not deliberately kill civilians serving as human shields, which is proscribed by the Geneva Conventions. Nor does the IDF mutilate women. Hamas celebrates such mayhem. The SS hid mass murder in faraway Eastern Europe, demolishing the gas chambers before they retreated. Hamas broadcast slaughter and rape for the world to see.

Still, it is not Hamas that must defend itself against the charge

of genocide before the International Criminal Court. Accordingly, the IDF is far worse than the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, as the pandemic of Jew-bashing illustrates. How come? Cynically put, the moral capital generated by million-fold slaughter in the Shoah has been used up. It was only two parts compassion and eight parts guilt from the start.

Now, total culpability has shifted to yesteryear's victims. For all the hand-wringing, do not ignore a reassuring difference between then and now. Israel can fight and win against Hamas and its enablers and obliterate Iran. But the downside is not pretty. Israel is now the Universal Jew. *Plus ça change.* *

EINAT WILF

The Palestine Propaganda Complex

*The Palestinian movement
has hijacked the meaning of words*



ADI SCHWARTZ and I had just exited another frustrating meeting with a smug European diplomat. Turning to an exasperated me, Adi—co-author of our book *The War of Return: How Western Indulgence of the Palestinian Dream Has Obstructed the Path to Peace*—offered an odd sort of comfort by pointing out that, at a minimum, we are trying to demolish an edifice of lies that was carefully constructed over seven decades. More likely, we are contending with lies that have been built up over centuries.

In 1892, Ahad Ha'am took "half solace" (as he termed his essay "Chatzi Nechama") in the fact that the original blood libel—Jews using the blood of Gentiles for their ritual food and drink—was so

clearly false. Why did the legendary journalist and cultural (as opposed to political) Zionist find comfort in this? Given that Jews know they cannot and will not drink blood, certainly not human blood, he believed they would thereby know, by extension, that it is indeed possible for the whole world to be wrong and for the Jews to be right.

That Jews should be confident in this knowledge was particularly important for Ahad Ha'am as he was deeply worried that, precisely because Jews were becoming more engaged with the outside society, they were far more susceptible to internalizing the litany of evils of which they were collectively accused—and to believe that they were indeed “the worst of the world’s nations.” He was especially appalled by the possibility that the evil “Jew of the imagination” would become the internalized Jewish understanding of what it meant to be a Jew.



In the 130 years since “Half Solace” was published, the blood libels that Ahad Ha'am encountered in tsarist Russia were updated by its Soviet heirs to fit an age of greater literacy and sophistication. These refurbished libels were then exported to the West, where they flourish today, creating the same dangerous dynamic that alarmed Ahad Ha'am. Too many Jews, especially those who are most engaged with the society around them, have come to believe that they, or their brethren, are indeed involved and complicit in the greatest crimes against humanity.

As in the 19th century, the mechanism by which doubt is instilled in Jews about our supposedly evil nature is generated by creating an environment that Ahad Ha'am called “general agreement.” That is, the broad society in which Jews live, and from which, as a result of emancipation, they are no longer separated, engages in a “general agreement” on the evil qualities and deeds of the Jews. It leads Jews to wonder: “Could the whole world be wrong?” This powerful mechanism of instilling doubt leads many Jews to buckle

under the weight of the accusations and their broad acceptance.

This mechanism of creating “general agreement” begins, as with every act of creation, whether good or evil, with words.

In the first step, words such as “Palestine,” “colonialism,” “refugee,” “return,” “justice,” “Semites,” “occupation,” “apartheid,” and “genocide” are chosen for their current associations and significations, either with Jews or with evil. These words are then emptied of any of their original, specific meanings and imbued with new and unique interpretations that either invert the original association or simply become removed from it. Typically, this involves taking the words out of their historical context and putting them into a new decontextualized and ahistorical world. The words are then used for the singular purpose of portraying collective Jews, especially those among them who dared seek sovereignty in their homeland or who support that enterprise, as uniquely evil.

Let me begin with the foundational word on which all other accusations rest: “Palestine,” a subject I examined in depth a decade ago with the scholar Shany Mor for the journal *Fathom*. The land “from the river to the sea,” to use the now-ubiquitous slogan, has been known as Palestine only twice before. First, the Roman Emperor Hadrian used “Palestina” as a way of suppressing Jewish resistance to his imperial rule. Second, it was used under the British Mandate, which was entrusted to Britain with the purpose of “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

In both cases, it was understood that “Palestine” simply denoted the territory where there had been, or would be, a Jewish homeland. This is why the League of Nations, in establishing the Mandate, did so to “give recognition to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine,” thereby forming “the grounds for reconstituting the Jewish people’s national home in that country.” This is also why local organizations at the time freely used the word “Palestine” in connection to entirely Jewish entities: *The Palestine Post*, for instance, which later became *The Jerusalem Post*, or the Palestine Philharmonic, later the Israel Philharmonic. Football associations with players bearing

Academia is key to conferring a sense
of authority on the process of equating
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names such as Kastenbaum, Friedmann, Nudelman, and Kraus, as well as coins, bore the name Palestine (but always with a mention of “Eretz Israel,” the Land of Israel).

Nor was that all. The Mandate gave Britain the option to separate the territory east of the River Jordan out of the area mandated for a Jewish home. What became Transjordan, and later Jordan, was forbidden to Jewish settlement. The remaining areas are, fantastically, now called “historic Palestine.” As Shany and I observed, “they are ‘historic’ only insofar as they lasted for barely three decades, were governed by a European superpower, and delimited as the future national home for the Jewish people.”

With independence, the Jewish people then did what every self-respecting nation that achieved independence did in the world at the same time. They shed the colonial name given to their territory (Siam, Gold Coast, Ceylon, Rhodesia, and, yes, Palestine) and replaced it with one rooted in its own culture, geography, and history: Israel.

It was only after Israel declared independence, and especially in the 1960s and '70s, that the Arabs of the land increasingly appropriated the name Palestine to indicate an Arab identity that possesses the sole exclusive “indigenous” claim to any land controlled by sovereign Jews. In doing so, they inverted and erased two millennia of customary association of the land with the Jews and their history, thereby turning the Jews, whose continuous historical, cultural, and religious connection to the land was never previously questioned, into the “foreign interlopers” in an Arab land to which they have no connection. At the end of this process, the associated meanings of

the word “Palestine,” of a history and connection of one people to one land (the Jews to Eretz Israel) were thereby transferred to those who have newly taken the name: the Arabs.



In 2013, Alberto Brandolini, an Italian programmer observing discourse on the internet, coined the adage that became known as Brandolini’s Law, also known as the “bullshit asymmetry principle.” “The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit,” he posited, “is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it.”

Palestine is only one example. Adi and I had to spend years of research and write an entire book to refute the three-word, poster-sized slogan “Palestine for Palestinians.” To do this, we had to dissect the manner in which the words “refugee” and “return” have been completely abused in the context of the Arab refugees from the War of 1948 (known since the 1960s as “Palestinians”). The words were inverted to keep the war alive, deprive the Jewish state of legitimacy, and maintain a constant question mark over the Jewish state’s very existence. The process of twisting these words has been so effective that, even though almost none of the millions who are still called “Palestinian refugees” are, in fact, refugees by normal international standards, they continue to enjoy the name, status, financial support, and international sympathy of people who have just escaped war and need protection.

Much the same could be written about the manner in which the term “anti-colonial” was inverted to turn the movement for self-determination of the Jewish people in their homeland—a movement that had to resist and outlive at least four empires in order to achieve its goals for Jewish independence—into the epitome of Western colonialism. Or the way in which terms such as “occupation,” “apartheid,” and “genocide,” which were clearly understood in a certain way for decades, were made to fit the purpose of painting the Jewish state as uniquely evil. Or how

“antisemitism” was decontextualized and used to pretend that it was an ideology against “Semites,” then to argue that Arabs are Semites, and that, by definition, they could never be antisemitic.

Or I could simply expose the mechanism by which each of these words has been conscripted to serve in a much larger process, the purpose of which is to create a global mindset, a “general agreement” that the Jewish state, and only the Jewish state, is made to carry the imprint of all of the world’s evils.

This is what I call the “placard strategy.” It is ingenious in that it employs a simple and constantly repeated equation, worthy of a kindergarten. On one side is the word “Israel” or “Zionism,” or even merely an image of the Star of David. On the other side, after an = sign, there is a litany of words that have become signifiers of evil. Thus:

Zionism = Racism

Zionism = Apartheid

Zionism = Genocide

These are endlessly recycled on placards, in media and on social media and, most consequentially, in academia and at the United Nations.

Academia is key to conferring a sense of authority on the process of equating Zionism with all of the world’s evils. As the Wilson Center scholar Izabella Tabarovsky has shown, this process works through the writing of papers that are then cross-referenced to create a tightly woven structure that becomes nearly impenetrable. (This is why what happens at Harvard actually matters.) Laundering the placard strategy through the United Nations, as with the 1975 “Zionism = Racism” resolution of the General Assembly, also lends authority to these equations; but most valuably, it creates the arena in which the message that the collective Jew equals evil enjoys a “general agreement.” South Africa’s bringing the charges of genocide against Israel at the International Court of Justice is of a piece with this playbook.

The placard strategy—with its nursery-rhyme repetition of a simple message in numerous forums, combined with academic authority and the imprimatur of U.N. bodies—leads to only one

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logical outcome. It is the one seen in recent demonstrations, in which a Star of David is placed in a trash bin labeled “Keep the World Clean.” If Israel, Zionism, and the Star of David are evil, then evil must be eradicated. Moreover, it must be put in the trash and eradicated because on the other side of this process awaits a world of justice, rights, equality, and freedom.

It is no coincidence that while all the evil words are made to be associated with the collective Jew, all the good words are made to be associated with those fighting the collective Jew. And more than any other placard, “Keep the World Clean” from the Star of David is the one that should lead Jews to see the ultimate purpose of the entire project: a world without the collective Jew. Indeed, the idea that the collective Jew is what stands between this world and utopia is an ancient one with deadly consequences.



We need a program for action. Here is mine.

First, *see*. See the whole picture. See the mechanism: the repetition, the cross-referencing, the academic authority, the “general agreement” of international bodies. They are all cogs in the “Keep the World Clean” machine. Once you see it, it becomes impossible to unsee.

Second, *steal*. Ahad Ha’am found half solace in the knowledge that Jews could steel themselves against the onslaught of lies. They

could keep in mind that the original blood libel was so obviously wrong that they need not assume that the European portrayal of Jews as evil was right. Today's accusations are far more sophisticated. They require deep knowledge for Jews to overcome them.

Third, *study*. Keeping Brandolini's Law in mind; it will take constant and disproportionate effort to understand why "Palestine for Palestinians" is nonsensical, or how "occupation" was erased of meaning in order to sustain the claim that Gaza was still occupied, or how "apartheid" was twisted to serve the purpose of equating it with Zionism. This effort to refute the new generation of blood libels is a form of a tax on Jews, forcing us to divert our attention, efforts, and resources to withstand the assault of lies. But perhaps we can use it as an opportunity for Jewish and Zionist study. In the spirit of the annual Torah reading cycle, we could take a word per month (January: "Palestine," February: "occupation," and so on) and dedicate each month to studying how this word was originally used and how it was transformed to serve in the cause of Jewish erasure and vilification.

Fourth, *struggle*. When it is understood that the logical conclusion of the placard strategy is to "Keep the World Clean" of the collective Jew, then it is imperative for Jews and their allies to struggle against its spread. Every arena in which words are reconstituted with authority matters: academia, media, international organizations and associations, street demonstrations — and placards.

And finally, fifth, *switch*. The words most dear to us, especially "Israel" and "Zionism," should be switched back, redefined in academia, international bodies, media — and, yes, placards, too — to restore their original associations with liberation, justice, vision, equality, dignity, and a forward-looking spirit of can-do.

If Jews and our allies see what is at stake, steel ourselves against the onslaught, study and command historical information, struggle against the placard strategy, and switch the words most dear to us back to their original and continuing meaning, we will have contributed to a world in which we can continue to thrive — and help others do so as well. *

AYAAN HIRSI ALI

Islamism

The only alternative to an Islamist dystopia is the culture of Enlightenment



HY, more than two decades after 9/11, when Osama bin Laden attacked America in order to inspire and lead “the global jihad project”—the term is from the left-leaning Brookings Institution—do we see massive demonstrations on the streets of Europe and the United States in

favor of the antisemitic, genocidal Islamist butchers of Hamas, who are dedicated to the same project? Why did the presidents of Harvard, Penn, and MIT, three of the most renowned universities in the world, refuse in their testimony before Congress to say that calling for the destruction of Israel and genocide against Jews violates campus rules—hiding instead behind the studied talking point that it depends on the context? Why have antisemitic incidents in the United States gone up by 400 percent? How did this happen?

I have told my story many times before, so I will be brief and to the point—that point being that I believe my story offers an answer

This essay is adapted from a speech given at the Levy Forum, Palm Beach Synagogue on December 6, 2023.

to this question, as well as a proposal for how we ought to proceed in the face of the current moral and intellectual rot in the West.



I was born in Somalia. I spent my formative years there and in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. I was part of a “clan culture,” in which the bloodline mattered above everything else. My clan “uncles” were there to help us out with schooling, food, and money wherever we went. There was no escape from the clan, which was also, in many ways, a microcosm of Islam, the dominant religion of Somalia. Many of the clan rules, especially for women, were the same as and sometimes drawn from the strictures of Islam.

Too often, the West dismisses clan and tribal networks simply as primitive structures superseded by superior, secular, American models. This is a mistake. If we are to fight against the “global jihad,” we must understand its sources of power. One important source is that clan networks have much to be said for them. The clan network certainly helped my family survive. My father, an anti-government dissident, relied on it for support. And the clan was at times generous and hospitable. But along with and inseparable from its generosity was its willingness to be vicious and brutal when its unwritten code of honor was violated. This was the case especially for girls. I was raised as a Muslim girl. I attended Koran school, and, per the values of the clan and my religion, I carried out back-breaking domestic labor. Girls and women were for marriage, breeding, and household chores — and not much else.

Worse, girls were seen as problems. My grandmother had a single son and 10 daughters. When describing her children, she would say, quite openly, “I have one son and 10 problems.” Girls were a burden, and the misogynistic culture of the clan and of Islam was enforced by women as well as men. Like the majority of other Somalian girls, I underwent female genital mutilation — “purification,” as it was described to us. That and the very limited roles assigned to us in the

kind of Muslim society Osama bin Laden championed should tell you all you need to know about the status of women in my native society.

Clan life based on Islam was a life full of violence. I was beaten constantly as a child. For many years, I thought this was normal. Death was also normal—to the point of being ever present. People died all the time, of violence, of disease. “From Allah we came, to Allah we return” was a phrase I heard constantly. To this day, when filling out medical forms that inquire into my family history of cancer and such things, I find myself unable to answer. Death was such a common occurrence in my early years that we hardly bothered to inquire into its causes.

When I was a teenager living with my family in Kenya, along came the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood subscribes to a vision of Sunni Islam that believes that Islamic teachings and politics are inseparable. It is also the Islamist group that spawned Hamas and al-Qaeda. And it offered me something more than life had offered me thus far: a life of service to Allah. I felt a glorious purpose. We had a mission to convert people to the “true Islam.” There was intellectual nourishment too, as we studied the Koran and the Hadith intensively. We were a community, a true brotherhood, united by a divine purpose. And this true Islam (i.e., Islamism) went even further than the passivity in the face of death with which I had grown up. It embraced death. To die for Allah was the most wonderful thing I could imagine. I would be guaranteed a place in paradise!

And it was through clan life, the Muslim Brotherhood, and my Islamic schooling that I became an antisemite.



We knew no Jews, but to call someone a Jew was so deep an insult that it sometimes led to murder. My female friends and I would sit in the mosque and pray that Allah would destroy the Jews. To want Israel’s destruction was an act of worship. We were never told about the idea of a two-state solution, much less did we

Too often, the West dismisses clan and tribal networks simply as primitive structures superseded by superior, secular, American models. This is a mistake. If we are to fight against the ‘global jihad,’ we must understand its sources of power.

entertain it. To do so would likely have been considered an act of sin; a transgression; a betrayal of God, His Prophet, and the Umma. My teacher, Sister Aziza, read us the Koran’s descriptions of Jahannam, the everlasting fire of hell in which the Jews — physically grotesque beings bearing horns out of which flew devils that would corrupt the world — would burn.

We made no distinction between liberal and Orthodox Jews; between Jews who settled Palestine and those opposed to settlements; between religious or atheist Jews. We also made no distinction between adult Jews and children. Male, female, mothers and fathers, old and young—to us, Jews were Jews, all evil and all enemies of Islam and all that is good, true, and decent. Jews controlled everything, and it was the duty of Muslims to destroy them.

I believed it all.

Much later, when I fled to the Netherlands to escape a marriage to a man in Canada that my father had arranged, I was shocked by my new home — so radically different from anything I had known. Looking back, I could see clearly the violence, hatred, and discord of the societies I had grown up in. Here, religion and politics were separate; women had equal rights and could live independently and make their own choices; I learned about the common good, a

concept I had never known before. There was no talk of death, no enemies to fight or pray against, and no bloodline or religion that could be defended only by waging war.

The more I understood about this new society, the more I liked and admired it. I assimilated. I lived life as a Dutch woman, suppressing the dissonance I felt at betraying my religion and upbringing. I abandoned the ideas of Islamism and educated myself about antisemitism.

But then 9/11 happened. Osama bin Laden was frank about his motivation: He despised the West and wished to supplant it with his fundamentalist vision of Sunni Islam. My response was very different from that of many Western leaders over the years. I was forced into a crisis of belief. I lost my Muslim faith. I recognized the challenge Islamism posed to Western institutions and values, and that Western political leaders, mired in the ideology of multiculturalism, were failing utterly to address the threat.

As I became increasingly involved in politics and activism, I watched with great interest and even greater dismay the continuing Western response. They chose to believe that bin Laden and his Islamist ilk did not mean what they said. They believed that multiculturalism was the solution, because, they thought, it would allow those who disagreed with the values of the West to live in the West as they saw fit, without disturbing its fundamental political arrangements.

But I saw that Islamist multiculturalism was really an embrace of clannism and primitivism. It segregated Muslim immigrants into ghettos and allowed them to subject women to arranged marriages, sharia, and other abuses. Nor did it intend to stay in the ghetto. It could not defeat the West militarily. But the goals of global jihad can also be achieved through what Islam calls Da'wah—proselytization.

This is why it was so baffling that the West sought the help of nations such as Saudi Arabia in dealing with Islamist terror: Saudi Arabia was for many years the world's biggest funder of Da'wah!

Saudi Arabia may be less violent than its co-religionists, but its goals are not different.

Western leaders naïvely saw sophisticated Islamist infiltrators as “moderate” representatives of Muslim communities. When asked how to integrate Muslims in the West, these “community leaders” unsurprisingly demanded separate Muslim schools, media platforms, courts, and victim status—but did so based on an exaggerated claim of “Islamophobia,” concealing their true motivations. And the more Western leaders tried to appease these “moderate” Islamists, the more the Islamists demanded as the price of “mediating” between the West and the jihadists. And yet the Western leaders kept on with these wrongheaded approaches.

When I left Holland for the United States in 2006, I hoped to find that America had learned from Europe’s failures. But while America did a better job of destroying terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, the country barely understood the concept of Da’wah, or the web of Islamist outreach, propaganda, and charities that finance Hamas and other terrorist networks.

America similarly fails to deter Iran’s Shia Islamist regime, which clearly seeks nuclear weapons to strengthen its hand against the Sunni Middle East and is quite direct about its destructive intentions to Israel and America itself. You can’t get clearer than “Death to Israel” and “Death to America,” the “little Satan” and the “great Satan” respectively.

Today, as a result, on Western soil and of course on the internet, Islamist recruiting and funding networks are entrenched. Sam Westrop of Focus on Western Islamism, a media outlet that educates readers about the Islamist threat in Western democracies, recently uncovered “over 260 million dollars sent through the 501(c) system to Hamas-aligned charities in the United States, provided by corporate foundations, employee-giving schemes, partisan community groups and a powerful array of Islamist grant-making foundations that make use of a largely-unregulated nonprofit sector.”

260 million dollars! It is shameful that this is allowed—and all

Unless we change course in the West as a whole, Bernard Lewis’s prediction of a majority-Muslim Europe by 2050 will come to pass.

because Western leaders failed to understand the true nature of Islamism more than 20 years ago, and more than 20 years before that, when Hamas was created in 1987.

—

I wrote last year in *The Free Press* with my Dutch friend Evelyn Markus about the way in which Islamism has poisoned the Netherlands:

- During the second intifada in Israel, which began in 2000, Muslim immigrants from Morocco started beating up Jews in Amsterdam and elsewhere in Europe, out of “solidarity” with the Palestinians. Some of our friends were attacked. Week after week, stones were thrown at Jews on their way to synagogue. These crimes barely made the news.
- In the years after, it was commonplace to hear “Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas” chanted in soccer stadiums by thousands of fans, some of them Moroccan immigrant kids, during the two minutes of silence in commemoration of those killed in World War II.
- “Jew” and “cancer Jew” became popular slurs on the streets of Amsterdam.

Sadly, particularly in the wake of October 7, this sort of thing has become common not only across Europe but in the United States, too—witness the shocking December 3 mob attack on

Goldie's, a restaurant in Philadelphia owned by the Israeli chef Michael Solomonov.

Is there hope for the future? In election after election, Western elites have reasserted their commitment to multiculturalism. And even when some leaders — for example, former U.K. Prime Minister and present Foreign Secretary David Cameron — dissented from this view, they never followed up with programs of assimilation or immigration reform. Things simply kept on going as before.

Now, however, ordinary working- and lower-middle-class citizens, on whom the cultural burden of multiculturalism always falls, have at last rebelled against the establishment, as Geert Wilders's shocking victory in Holland has shown. I shall stick with Holland as a prime example, although it is not the only one: In response to Muslim immigration, conservative parties advancing traditional Western values are prevailing all over Europe.

In Holland, political and media leaders told the public that opposing migration and Islamic practice was xenophobic and bigoted. Insulated from the effects of multiculturalism, they persuaded themselves it was not changing the nature of the country. Meanwhile, the Muslim population in the Netherlands grew twentyfold from 60,000 to about 1.2 million in 60 years. This population is largely Islamist, increasingly well-entrenched, and making its presence felt. Unwelcome warnings from Dutch intelligence officials about the rise of Islamism have generally gone unheeded by the country's elected leaders.

Not surprisingly, the Jews are leaving, down to fewer than 50,000 from a high of about 160,000 in 1941. But Dutch people outside the educated, well-off elite who were not Jewish and so not under the same direct threat, nevertheless saw and felt the structural changes in their daily lives, were frustrated at having their concerns dismissed in the most insulting terms — and voted accordingly. The post-October 7 pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Dutch streets — some violent — may have been the

final catalyst. In his landslide victory, Wilders won more voters from the 18–35 age group than any other party did.



Perhaps, then, there is hope. Ordinary people are resisting the mainstream progressive consensus. Perhaps the elites will start to listen, if only to maintain their position in Dutch society. When voters complain about immigrant ghettos in which women are effectively enslaved, or about their community and sports centers being turned into Islamist headquarters, politicians will no longer be able to dismiss them as racist. No longer will they be able to repeat mindlessly the mantras of toleration and multiculturalism, or to claim that “integration is a two-way street,” while demanding integration in only one direction.

Hopefully, in the post-October 7 world, the stakes are clearer to all. Unless we change course in the West as a whole, Bernard Lewis’s prediction of a majority-Muslim Europe by 2050 will come to pass, and the Islamists will have entrenched themselves so deeply and widely that their vision for Europe will prevail. The prediction of the leading Muslim cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, often erroneously regarded as a moderate, will come true: “We will conquer Europe, we will conquer America! Not through sword but through Da’wah.” Will the message be heard in the United States and the West more generally?

The answer is far from clear. Today, Western societies continue to torture themselves over their histories of colonialism and imperialism, while allowing antisemitic, genocidal thugs and their apologists free rein on our streets, barely 80 years after the Holocaust. The disciples of bin Laden smile as Gen Z TikTokers idiotically praise his evil rantings. The woke revolutionaries who have infiltrated our institutions seek to tear down the civilizing work of centuries.

Unless October 7 is the beginning of a reversal of Europe’s and America’s creeping cultural suicide, Islamism will prevail. We must

sound the alarm, restating the Judeo-Christian values that have benefited us all so much. We must be loud in speaking up against the wrongheadedness of the go-along-to-get-along policies of our elites, and elect leaders who understand the West's existential crisis and are willing to address it. We must champion our Western civilizational heritage and show Gen Z that the world built up over centuries by Western values is infinitely superior to the hellish dystopian vision of the Islamists.

In short, we must fight for our values wholeheartedly and unashamedly. Only then might we save the West. I have seen the alternative: I have lived in that Islamist dystopia. The wonderful cultures I found in 1992, which have immeasurably improved my life, are vanishing before our very eyes as our society's terrible mistakes lead us to the Islamist precipice. Let October 7 be a spur to us to act before it is too late. *

SUSIE LINFIELD

Root-Causism

The long-running obsession with single ‘root causes’ will never solve the problems of the Middle East



IMMEDIATELY after news of Hamas’s October 7 massacres broke—before it was known just what had happened, before the shock of the cruelty had been absorbed (which will, perhaps, never happen)—instant, and astonishingly confident, analyses of the event’s “root cause” emerged. On October 7 itself, the Democratic Socialists of America, once the home of Michael Harrington’s humane liberal Zionism, issued a statement asserting that the attack was “a direct result of Israel’s apartheid regime”; numerous student groups quickly followed with similar responses. Since then, there has been a cascade of “root causism,” especially from those who identify as pro-Palestinian. Nour Odeh, a political analyst and former Palestinian Authority spokesperson, told *PBS NewsHour* of “the root cause of all this misery,” by which she meant “the occupation.” Marwan Muasher, formerly Jordan’s foreign minister,

referred to “the root cause of the problem, which is the occupation.” Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi explained on *Democracy Now!* that “the context is settler colonialism and apartheid.” In a subsequent interview he told me, “Any event has multiple causes” but that the “correct origin point” is the Balfour Declaration: “Everything follows a pattern that is set then.”

I firmly believe that Israel will never know peace until a just political solution with the Palestinian people is implemented (though it’s possible that Iran and jihadist terror groups will pursue their intention to destroy Israel even then); during last year’s democracy protests in Israel, leftists referred to the occupation as “the elephant in the room.” Zionism is self-determination, not rule over others. But wouldn’t an event of October 7’s magnitude have multiple causes, from Saudi-Israeli rapprochement to pathological hatred of Jews qua Jews? (See under: Hamas Covenant, suicide bombings, etc.) Most people resisting oppression—indeed, most Palestinians living under the occupation—don’t respond by murdering babies, burning families alive, and raping women. Couldn’t there be numerous factors at work?

“On social media, and in conversations, the root cause is the occupation, settler colonialism, the Holocaust, the Dreyfus case, European imperialism,” notes Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown. “People are always looking for the magic answer to complicated questions.” On the Israeli Right, too, there was talk of a root cause, which was variously identified as the Oslo Accords, the 2005 pullout from Gaza, or the presumably essentialist nature of the Palestinians.

These hasty “analyses” irritated and fascinated me. It’s banal to say that the attacks did not come out of the blue; no event does. Or to insist that they are embedded in a context; every event is. But these explanations were depressingly formulaic, as if the speakers were on autopilot. In a 1954 essay called “Understanding and Politics,” Hannah Arendt wrote, “Each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new

possibilities which together transcend...the significance of all origins.” Moreover, there is a gap between the political causes that underlie an event and what I would call its moral texture. It was precisely the newness — and the sadistic nature of Hamas’s violence — that these instant analysts seemed unwilling, even frightened, to contend with. As Hamas spokesmen have eagerly explained, they aimed to change the existing political equation, not only in Israel but in the larger region as well; and they have. They also altered the moral calculus. Why the inability of these analysts to think anew, to acknowledge that things have changed? Why the inability to grapple with complexity? What is the lure of finding a root cause, and what does one *do* with it once it has, presumably, been found?

Millions of words have been written attempting to explain world-altering events such as World War I, the Russian Revolution, the rise of fascism, the development of totalitarianism, and, especially, the Holocaust. My students often tell me something they learned in high school: that the Versailles Treaty caused the Holocaust or, at least, the Nazi ascension to power. There is a valuable insight here: National humiliation is a fearsome, potent force. But I point out that the Nazis were a tiny, marginal party for more than a decade after Versailles — and that, in any event, there is a great distance, and no straight line, between Versailles and Treblinka, just as the Balfour Declaration did not predetermine October 7. A lot of bad things had to happen, and a lot of bad choices had to be made, to transform one into the other. Nothing was preordained.

One of the most acclaimed, and contested, accounts of the Holocaust is Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which posits that a deep-seated culture of German eliminationist anti-semitism was the primary cause of the genocide. Historian Götz Aly found a different answer in *Why the Germans? Why the Jews?»: German envy of Jewish success, material and other. These are important books, and each offers crucial insights. But surely a continent-wide event involving millions of people had an almost dizzying number of*

Like Lot's wife, post-colonialists are mesmerized by the past.

factors and contingencies. Every root cause leads not to a definitive answer but, rather, to another set of questions.

Middle Eastern politics have been particularly prone to root-causism. At least since the 1950s, it has been a truism within the Arab world that the existence of Israel was responsible for the region's underdevelopment and chronic violence; accordingly, the defeat of the Jewish state was the road to Arab renewal. (A fixation on Israel as both hated enemy and mysterious neighbor weaves through Egyptian writer Yasmine El Rashidi's haunting novel *Chronicle of a Last Summer*.) The Arab Spring was an on-the-ground refutation of this concept: For the first time in modern history, millions of courageous Egyptians, Syrians, Tunisians, Libyans, and others streamed into the streets demanding rights, freedom, citizenship, and liberation from their hated homegrown dictators. The rallying cries "The people want the fall of the regime!" and "Karama!" ("Dignity!") replaced "Death to Israel!"

The catastrophic results of those uprisings—the brutal military dictatorship in Egypt, the even more brutal civil wars in Syria and Yemen, the violent dissolution of Libya, the reversal of democratic gains in Tunisia—should have put the Israel-first (or Israel-only) concept to rest, because the Jewish state played no role in either the uprisings or their defeats. But the Hamas attacks and the subsequent war in Gaza have thrust the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the almost mythological power of the Nakba, back onto center stage with a vengeance, essentially obliterating all other causes. As Ghazi Hamad, a senior Hamas official, told a Lebanese television station in the wake of the attack: "The existence of Israel is what causes all that pain, blood and tears." And whereas some Arab

Root-causism is the fundamentalism of intellectuals (and activists). It dispenses with dialectics, uncertainty, contingency, agency. It also lacks a tragic sensibility.

countries may have dropped the obsession with Israel, the ayatollahs in Tehran have taken up the mantle with fanatical vigor. Iran itself can be seen as a root-cause regime, one whose major institutions are organized around the conviction that Israel is the ur-evil that must be defeated at any cost.



The lure of the root cause isn't confined to the Middle East; it is alive and well here at home. The American Left's most influential thinker is popular precisely *because* of his monolithic thinking. Throughout a long career, Noam Chomsky has analyzed virtually every international conflict through the prism, and as the result, of U.S. imperialism. This enables his followers to believe that they understand the bewildering nature of the world in which we live and to center the U.S. as the prime motor in world politics, thereby denying agency to pretty much everyone else. It is a strange combination of American guilt and American narcissism.

In the past several years, root-cause thinking has become prevalent in much of American academia, the “mainstream” media, and a swathe of corporate America. Our society is undeniably permeated by deep inequalities, but is racism—“systemic” or otherwise—really the only explanation for every phenomenon from low reading scores to Donald Trump's populist power? Slavery is

certainly a foundational part of our history, without which the American experience cannot be comprehended. But can every event, starting with the American Revolution, be seen as a subsidiary reflection of the slave regime? (And isn't the struggle *against* slavery and other forms of oppression an equal part of the American tale?) Talk of racism as America's "DNA" is another form of root-causism and, like other versions of the concept, deeply fatalistic. Its proponents seem alarmingly unaware of the fact that injecting biological terms into politics has proved to be a dangerous endeavor.

Post-colonialism and "decolonialism" are root-cause ideologies that have taken hold in (dare I say colonized?) numerous academic departments; institutions including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and NYU (my own) have programs and a capacious menu of courses devoted to them. At my university, students have been offered "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," "Poetry and the Politics of Decolonization," and "Decolonizing NYC," among many others.

In this view, the anti-colonial revolutions of the post-World War II period failed to create new dispensations. On the contrary, the subsequent trajectories of those nations — which, especially in the Middle East, are often tormented by dictatorship, corruption, poverty, religious persecution, oppression of women, illiteracy, terrorism, and religious-ethnic violence — must be attributed to colonialism, which has apparently persisted for decades after its presumed overthrow. In his 2004 book *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Albert Memmi described this as "a new reality . . . of people who were once but are no longer colonized" but "sometimes continue to believe they are." The world is divided into a Manichean binary: the global south versus the developed north, the colony versus the metropole, the indigenous versus the settler-colonial, the marginalized versus the privileged. (And underneath it all: the good versus the bad.) As Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American international-affairs scholar and democracy activist, recently argued in *Liberties*, this paradigm may have made political sense at the time of the anti-colonial revolutions, but it has become absurdly anachronistic in the decades

since; he described decolonialism as an “often bizarre messianic theory, premised on a stupendously simplified picture of what is in fact a maddeningly complicated and tragically fragmented world.” An infelicitous development is at work here: As the world becomes less simple, political analysis becomes more simple. Like Lot’s wife, post-colonialists are mesmerized by the past; they reject Arendt’s idea of bringing newness into the world.

Post-colonialism’s close cousin is settler-colonialism, which may be an even more powerful contemporary political concept. Though rooted in the past, it addresses the present and has plans for the future. To its adherents, Zionism is the prime example of settler-colonialism—and the one that can, and must, be dismantled. “The pervasiveness of this notion goes well beyond academic programs,” observes Steven Zipperstein, a Stanford historian. “It is manifest everywhere. It’s how you understand the world, and it intersects with Zionism, which emerges as the greatest sin of all.”



Root-causism is the fundamentalism of intellectuals (and activists). It dispenses with dialectics, uncertainty, contingency, agency. It also lacks a tragic sensibility: the knowledge that our greatest victories can be our most severe defeats; that failure and loss without compensation or meaning are part of the human condition; that contingency and finitude, which is to say mortality, define us. The acceptance of these truths is sorely needed at the present, and dire, political moment in which we find ourselves.

Root-causism lacks humility, too. Not everything can be “mastered,” as the Germans would say: certainly not instantly or completely. Human beings are puzzling creatures, ones that, as Primo Levi wrote, are capable of constructing “an infinite enormity of pain.” Our capacity for cruelty should continue to shock us; there are some things to which we should not be reconciled and that we don’t entirely comprehend. After the Shoah, the historian

Isaac Deutscher, whose worldview was rooted in rational Marxism, expressed a sense of profound ethical bewilderment. In an essay called “The Jewish Tragedy and the Historian,” he wrote, “We are confronted here by a huge and ominous mystery of the degeneration of the human character that will forever baffle and terrify mankind.” Deutscher’s usual analytic tools faltered when confronting this; he suggested that we might need a tragedian — an Aeschylus or Sophocles — to help us understand it.

In Joshua Harmon’s play *Prayer for the French Republic*, now playing on Broadway, a Jewish-French family called the Salomons faces resurgent antisemitism in the midst of cosmopolitan Paris. In the last scene, the family asks itself, “Why do they hate us?” A cascade of suggestions follows, including “We’re different!” and “We’ve survived!” It’s clear that the history of the Jewish people would be drastically different if there were one simple answer. But alas, there is no root cause.

Benny Morris, one of Israel’s finest historians, takes a nuanced view of the root-cause explanations that flourished after October 7. “From the Palestinian perspective, pointing to the occupation as a root cause for the Hamas attack certainly has some legitimacy,” he told me. “The Israeli boot has been on the Palestinians since 1967.” And, he adds, “from 1948: The Palestinians were driven out, though they started the war. I would add that jihadism and religious fanaticism are a root cause as well. Children in the Gaza Strip are inculcated from a very young age: Jews are the enemy, and you have to kill them. That accounts for the viciousness of the attack. Hamas attacked Israel because it hates Israel.” A longtime observer of the region’s apparently inexhaustible forms of destruction, he adds, “As usual in the Middle East, there is enough blame to go around.” The Middle East may lack for many things, but as Morris says, it offers “root causes for everybody.” *

TOM GROSS

The BBC

The BBC has framed the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for decades. Its primacy is ill-deserved



FEW MONTHS before I graduated from Oxford, I was interviewed for the British Broadcasting Corporation's prestigious two-year journalist trainee course. This was the best way at the time to secure a job at Britain's most respected news broadcaster. A committee of five interviewed me. The chair asked whether there was anything I would have changed about a recent edition of BBC One's then-flagship *Nine O'Clock News*.

In a calm and reasoned way, I said that although the BBC could not report on everything in its half-hour bulletin and had to be selective about which international items to cover alongside British ones, it had struck me that Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Iraqi Kurds at Halabja deserved to be much higher up on BBC News than it had been.

I pointed out that this horrific act was the largest use of chemical weapons against a civilian target since World War II. Between

3,000 and 5,000 Kurdish children and adults had been gassed to death. Yet the BBC had only mentioned it in passing about 20 minutes into its news bulletin, after a light-hearted item about Prince Charles. I added that the BBC's main news competitor in Britain at the time, ITN, had led its evening news bulletin that day with a five-minute report on the gassing of the Kurds.

There was silence in the room. The members of the BBC interviewing panel glanced at one another with expressions of bemusement. The chair then turned and asked me, with a slight scowl, "Are you a Zionist?"

And then, before I could answer, my interview came to an end.



Today, with the worldwide wave of antisemitism that has followed Hamas's latest savagery, it is clearer than ever that a great deal of anti-Zionism — from the illustrious lecture halls of Harvard to the streets of European capitals — is merely a mask for old-fashioned antisemitism.

But even more than three decades ago, it was obvious to me that the attitude of the BBC's interviewing panel perfectly exemplified what Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly told a student in the aftermath of the Six-Day War: "When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You're talking antisemitism."

At no point in my BBC interview or application process had I mentioned Israelis, Palestinians, or Jews. In what was the pre-Google era, my family background is not something that the BBC could easily have discovered.

I'm secular and had barely ever made an issue of being Jewish (although that hadn't prevented me from being on the receiving end of some vicious antisemitic remarks not just from fellow school pupils in London but from the deputy headmaster). It was the BBC that brought up the subject of Zionism. Needless to say, I wasn't granted a place on the BBC trainee course.

As the biggest and arguably most influential news organization in the world, broadcasting in dozens of languages on multiple TV and radio platforms as well as online, the BBC may be Israel's most problematic antagonist among Western media.

The BBC's misreporting about Israel, along with its selective inattention to other Middle Eastern issues such as the plight of the Kurds, derives from the same warped view of the world and Israel's place in it. The BBC's problem, which persists to this day, is so widespread that many believe it has become institutionalized. It certainly has repercussions for British and Western foreign policy, and for the struggle against antisemitism.

The BBC is not the most anti-Israel news organization in the Western world. Its prejudices are not as jaw-dropping as, for example, those of *The Guardian* (the daily paper of choice for many BBC news staff), which this January blamed Israel's current action against Hamas for worldwide climate change. BBC reporters do not directly encourage terrorism against Israelis, as did, for example, Mohammed Fayq Abu Mostafa, a Gazan photojournalist working for Reuters, who called on ordinary Gazans to cross the border into Israel and join the Hamas rampage on October 7. (Among other things, Abu Mostafa then eagerly shared his footage of Gazans lynching an Israeli soldier.)

Yet, as the biggest and arguably most influential news organization in the world, broadcasting in dozens of languages on multiple TV and radio platforms as well as online, to a combined audience of

about half a billion people, the BBC may be Israel’s most problematic antagonist among Western media. Its power and prominence are further guaranteed by the lavish funding it enjoys as a public broadcaster, funded by a license fee from every television owner in Britain, whether or not he or she actually watches the BBC. For its audience of hundreds of millions, including world leaders, it retains an unrivaled reputation for accuracy and impartiality — an increasingly rare phenomenon in this era of fake or partisan news.

This reputation is not deserved. And while the BBC is regarded as biased on many issues (Brexit, for instance) in a way that has angered large sections of the British public, when it comes to Israel, its distortions and one-sidedness are in a league of their own.



On at least three occasions since October 7, the BBC has been forced into begrudging acknowledgments of its misreporting. In all three cases, it eagerly repeated lies fed to it by Hamas.

The most notorious of these happened early. On October 17, the BBC reported that an Israeli rocket hit al-Ahli hospital in Gaza, killing 500 Palestinian patients and staff. In another report, the BBC added that “hundreds of people have been killed in an Israeli air strike on Ahli hospital in Gaza.”

The archbishop of Canterbury, head of the worldwide Anglican church, retweeted the report, which had been viewed online 2.8 million times in its first hour. He added his own comment, seen by a further million of the archbishop’s own followers: “This is an appalling and devastating loss of lives at the Ahli hospital.” A further BBC news report was headlined “Indescribable Scenes at Hospital.”

Perhaps the scenes at the hospital were “indescribable” because the hospital hadn’t been hit at all. It was the hospital parking lot that had been hit, producing far fewer casualties. And it had not been hit by an Israeli bomb but by a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket, evidently fired from a nearby cemetery. Israel doesn’t bomb hospitals.

But the damage was done. Other media—trusting the BBC—then repeated the lie that Israel had killed hundreds of civilians at a hospital. Hundreds of thousands of angry protesters across Europe and the Middle East took to the streets chanting “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” effectively calling for the eradication of Israel.

In November, the BBC reported that Israeli troops had targeted medical staff during a raid on another hospital, this time the al-Shifa medical complex in Gaza City. A news anchor, turning a Reuters report on its head, said the Israeli military was “targeting people including medical teams as well as Arab speakers.” In fact, what the IDF spokesperson had said was, “Our medical teams and Arabic speakers are on the ground to ensure that these supplies reach those in need.” Another blood libel. The BBC later issued a brief on-air apology.

Then, on December 24, the BBC accused Israeli troops of “carrying out summary executions in the Gaza Strip” of 137 Palestinian civilians and burying them in unmarked graves in northern Gaza. The report itself was based on a thinly sourced story from Agence France-Presse and contained a cursory acknowledgment that the IDF was “currently unaware” of the incident. But it was the BBC that had the reach and power to disseminate the AFP’s shoddy (if relatively obscure) reporting to a global audience. That the libel was broadcast on Christmas Eve also came as no surprise: It perpetuated, if only subconsciously, a centuries-old tradition of inciting hatred against Jews around Christian holidays.

It took more than two weeks, and pressure from Conservative Party politicians, before the broadcaster ran an apology on January 9 for reporting these Hamas fabrications. It admitted that it had failed to “make sufficient effort to seek corroborating evidence to justify reporting the Hamas claim.” The admission consisted of a small item hidden on its website. By contrast, the original defamatory report about “summary executions by Israel” was prominently broadcast on six different occasions on the BBC World Service and on BBC Radio 4.

Perhaps the scenes at the hospital were ‘indescribable’ because the hospital hadn’t been hit at all. It was the hospital parking lot that had been hit, producing far fewer casualties. And it had not been hit by an Israeli bomb but by a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket.

There have been other cases since October 7 when the BBC has been caught out. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* discovered in February that the BBC had quietly let go of an employee whom presumably even the BBC couldn’t justify keeping. Dawn Queva, a senior BBC scheduling coordinator, was sacked after it was revealed that in Facebook posts published under a pseudonym she had called Jewish people “Nazis” who funded a “holohoax.” She also described white people as a “virus” and claimed that Israel was attempting to “forcibly permanently sterilise black women without their knowledge or consent.”

There have been one or two other cases in which the BBC has been forced to let go of blatantly antisemitic employees. But in my mind the larger problem is those more senior correspondents and producers whom the BBC has stuck with, who are too clever to say anything so ugly in public but instead lie and deceive in their reports in ways that will almost inevitably stir up antisemitism among many of the BBC audience.

Yet some observers argue that the broadcaster’s Arabic-language service, which has an estimated audience of 36 million people, is even worse than its English-language broadcast.

In 2021, an investigation by the *Jewish Chronicle* noted that “the

If the BBC's slanders against Israel aren't new, what is new is the cultural climate in Britain in which the slanders are being made.

BBC was forced to acknowledge 25 mistakes in its Arabic coverage of Israel in just over two years, issuing on average nearly one correction a month." Among the things the BBC was forced to apologize for was describing the Israeli army as "Israeli Occupation Forces" and Israel itself as "Palestine." At least two journalists recruited by the BBC Arabic Service had previously worked for Al-Manar, a TV station owned by Hezbollah that has been designated as a terrorist entity by the United States. It also published a sycophantic profile of Ahlam al-Tamimi, the Hamas mastermind of a 2001 terrorist attack at a Jerusalem pizzeria, which that day killed 15 Israeli civilians, including 7 young children and a pregnant woman, and wounded 130 more, one of whom died after 22 years in a coma. The bomb was packed with nails, nuts, and bolts to cause maximum pain and severe injuries. (I witnessed the horrific aftermath of that attack as a reporter.) The BBC later regretted the "lapse in our editorial standards."



These instances of the BBC's having been caught out and forced to apologize are merely the tip of a very large iceberg. For decades, the BBC has simultaneously castigated Israel while turning a blind eye to Palestinian terrorism.

That was certainly true of its treatment of Yasser Arafat, the godfather of modern terrorism who later became the kleptocratic dictator of the Palestinian Authority and the mastermind of the

second intifada—a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings of Israeli buses, schools, and cafés. As the British litigator Trevor Asserson documented, the BBC routinely described Arafat “with terms such as heroism, selfless devotion to public duty, hardworking, and having natural leadership talents.”

In his final days, a BBC profile of Arafat described him as a man of “personal courage” who “often led the way into action against the Israelis,” though the evidence for this claim is slim and runs aground on Arafat’s well-known penchant for self-mythologizing. When he was on his deathbed in a French hospital in 2004, the BBC’s Jerusalem correspondent, Barbara Plett, admitted on air that she had cried in sadness for him and spoke of her “connection to the man.”

In any serious news organization, she would have been suspended and demoted, if not sacked outright. Instead, after being initially cleared by BBC management, she was given a slap on the wrist by the broadcaster’s Board of Governors. Today, she is the BBC’s senior State Department correspondent in Washington. The only other time I can recall a BBC correspondent being so emotional was when Princess Diana died.

But if the BBC’s slanders against Israel—along with its hero-worship of Israel’s enemies—aren’t new, what is new is the cultural climate in Britain in which the slanders are being made. Attacks on Jews are at a record postwar high, with the Metropolitan Police reporting a 13-fold increase since October 7. That contributes to an atmosphere that was already poisonous for Jews among some segments of British society—and in which the BBC also has played its usual part.

No example better illustrates this than a November 2021 incident in which Jewish passengers on a bus crawling through traffic on London’s Oxford Street were harassed and abused by men making Hitler salutes and banging their shoes on the windows. In its report, the BBC alleged that the passengers on the bus had uttered anti-Muslim slurs, a claim for which there was no evidence, but that conveniently served to transform a blatantly

antisemitic attack into a nonexistent instance of Islamophobia. An investigation by the U.K. media regulator Ofcom ultimately found “significant editorial failings” in the BBC’s report. But as with so many of the BBC’s mistakes, the apologies and corrections came long after the initial damage had been done.

Some former staff are speaking out. After the BBC refused to call Hamas “terrorists” during its report on Hamas’s beheading of Israeli civilians, Jon Sopel, the BBC’s former North America editor, said in a post on X that the corporation’s editorial guidelines were “no longer fit for purpose.” “If this doesn’t describe an act of pure terror by terrorists, what does?” Sopel wrote.

None of this, of course, is to suggest that the BBC shouldn’t report unsparingly on every subject it covers, including when it comes to Israeli misdeeds. Nor is it the case that every BBC reporter and editor is biased against Israel, much less antisemitic: There are some correspondents, such as Lyse Doucet and James Reynolds, who make an attempt to be fair. But not nearly enough. Overall, the problem is long-standing, profound, and seemingly ineradicable.

Why? Perhaps it’s the reflexive leftism of the people the BBC tends to recruit, which often leads to an inveterate anti-Zionism. Perhaps it’s an outgrowth of anti-Americanism and the habit of seeing Israel as an extension of American neo-imperialism. There are probably deep if hidden strains of antisemitism, partly of the old-fashioned British kind that I experienced many years ago, and partly a reflection of the broadcaster’s large audience in the Arab world. And some of it is plain old lazy journalism—like cribbing from their friends at *The Guardian*.

In truth, the explanation doesn’t really matter. The consequences are the same, and the Jews suffer.



The remedy, however, does matter. The BBC has long been aware that it has a problem. Back in 2015, former BBC Chairman Lord

Michael Grade took the unusual step of publicly criticizing the BBC for its “inexcusable” anti-Israel bias. More recently, BBC News CEO Deborah Turness has responded to charges of BBC bias by claiming to put “trust in the corporation’s news” at the forefront of her agenda. She has launched “BBC Verify” with the stated aim of “fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analyzing data and—crucially—explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth.”

That promise has not been kept, and there is little to suggest it ever will. In broadcast after broadcast, the BBC has been misleading, misreporting, and sometimes libeling Israel in ways that aren’t merely wrong and offensive but also dangerous to Jews in Israel and abroad. By charter, the Corporation is bound to be “open minded, fair and show a respect for the truth.” It’s a trust the BBC has been violating for decades. Perhaps it should be treated accordingly, starting with the loss of its taxpayer sinecure. *

Republican Isolationists

The GOP has followed Trump down an isolationist path that is dangerous for Israel



IN 2016, during the waning days of Barack Obama's two terms in office and with the imminent prospect of Hillary Clinton's election, President George W. Bush was overheard telling a gathering of aides, "I'm worried that I will be the last Republican president." Bush was mistaken, of course: Donald Trump eked out a narrow Electoral College victory despite losing the popular-vote tally by almost 3 million votes. But while Bush's speculation proved to be literally wrong, it may well have been figuratively true. Donald Trump has gone on to remake the contemporary Republican Party in his own image, jettisoning the GOP's postwar commitment to a form of conservative internationalism that was the hallmark of the presidencies of Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and both Bushes.

The conservative internationalist persuasion of those Republican administrations combined the notions of peace through

strength, robust support for America's globe-girdling system of alliances and military bases, and general support for liberalizing international trade relations. Although it is still possible to find that conservative internationalism in the views of Nikki Haley and Chris Christie, the party's center of gravity has clearly moved in the direction of the reborn "America First" mantra of Trump and his key supporters in the congressional Republican Party, including but not limited to Representatives Jim Jordan and Marjorie Taylor Greene and Senators J.D. Vance and Josh Hawley.

Those of us who worked with Bush 43 would hear him say, on more than one occasion, "One doesn't have to scratch too deep in the Republican Party to hit a deep vein of isolationism, protectionism, and xenophobia, and it is my job as party leader to lean against and moderate that tendency." Within that vein, there flows a latent but powerful current of antisemitism. It's vital for conservatives, particularly Jewish ones, to understand how the Republican Party's turn toward its old isolationist instincts under Trump poses risks to the safety of Jews in Israel and the United States alike.



For most of its first century of existence, the Republican Party had been committed to the protection of American manufacturers (in keeping with its roots in the antebellum Whig Party), wary of foreign entanglements (although Teddy Roosevelt was something of a counter-example), and blemished by its hostility to immigration, particularly of Roman Catholics.

The reluctance to become embroiled in the affairs of other countries was rooted not only in the party's Whiggish political roots but even more deeply in the nation's early political traditions. "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign Nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible," said George Washington in his Farewell Address. Thomas Jefferson reflected a similar sentiment in his first

Inaugural Address: “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.”

Staying aloof from world affairs in the 19th century—a century marked by the globalization of trade, the emergence of steam-powered, iron-clad navies, and a communications revolution powered by transoceanic telegraphic cables—was always going to be difficult. The challenge became that much more vexing in the 20th century. German U-boat attacks on shipping helped draw America into World War I, with its promise of being a “war to end all wars.” But the failure of the peace conference at Versailles to make good on Woodrow Wilson’s promise to have a peace without victors or indemnities led to profound public disenchantment, fed by the notion that the war had been waged not for grandiose ideals but to benefit Wall Street financiers and militarily connected industries.

As the peace of Europe broke down in the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt’s attempts to work around the legal impediments that the isolationists had created kicked off a furious debate marked by what historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called “the searing personal impact of those angry days.” Isolationists led by Charles Lindbergh organized an America First movement to oppose U.S. involvement in the European crisis. It held tremendous appeal, particularly among elite university students: Kingman Brewster, the future president of Yale, was a member, as were future Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, future president Gerald Ford, and Sargent Shriver, who later founded the Peace Corps.

Many of these members were youthful idealists wary of another world war. But it’s impossible to understand America First without also discussing its antisemitism. Much of it was driven by supporters of Father Charles Coughlin, a radio priest who was a New Deal opponent and a rank antisemite. The head of the Florida chapter of America First claimed that Jews “are primarily responsible for our being advanced so far along the path to war.” In September 1941, Lindbergh gave a speech suggesting that Jewish groups were playing a major role in dragging the United States into the European conflict.

As the America First faction grows in power inside the Republican Party, the antisemitism that accompanies it will begin to undermine support for Israel.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor destroyed the reputations and political careers of many America Firsters. Others, notably Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, recognized that the isolationism they had espoused was wrong-headed and no longer tenable in a world increasingly marked by the rise of transoceanic navies, air power, and nuclear weapons. Dwight Eisenhower's nomination victory over Ohio's Senator Robert Taft, the party's leading isolationist, marked a definitive GOP turn to the conservative internationalism that largely defined it for the next 65 years.



But if conservative isolationism faded, it never went away. It was represented by Senator John Bricker of Ohio in the 1950s, and in more recent years by Republicans such as presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, Representative Ron Paul of Texas, and his son, Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky.

When Donald Trump became a serious presidential candidate in 2015, he was not particularly well-informed about foreign affairs. (Unlike most of the other candidates, he lacked even an informal group of national-security advisers and notoriously told Chuck Todd of *Meet the Press*, “Well, I watch the shows.”)

But Trump's ignorance did not mean that he lacked consistent views or a fundamental outlook. He had for years decried U.S. trade policy

and advocated protectionism for American manufacturers and had consistently derided America's allies for being "free riders" who enjoyed protection from foreign threats at America's expense. He also seemed diffident, at best, when it came to the promotion of human rights or democracy and seemed especially attracted to political strongmen.

Perhaps the first observer to spot the similarities between Trump's views and Robert Taft's was the Brookings Institution's Thomas Wright, now on President Biden's National Security Council staff. In a prescient *Politico* essay, Wright wrote that the New York tycoon had a "worldview that makes a great leap backward in history, embracing antiquated notions of power that haven't been prevalent since prior to World War II." Trump openly embraced America First as a slogan; Wright called out the echoes of not only Taft but also Lindbergh in Trump's foreign-policy opinions dating back to the mid-1980s.

What has changed since Trump's surprising rise to power is that the Republican Party in the electorate (and, more slowly, the Republican Party in the Congress) has shaped itself around his views despite efforts by some of the so-called adults in the room who served in his administration to smooth the rough edges off his isolationism by declaring "America First but not alone." Hostility to lowering trade barriers, reluctance to provide additional aid to Ukraine, skepticism about America's allies, indifference or hostility to the promotion of democracy—all this has become mainstream among Republicans. One of the most important policy consequences of this turn to isolationism is the disdainful attitude of leading Trumpists in the party toward support for Ukraine. As a Senate candidate in 2022, J.D. Vance said, "I've got to be honest with you, I don't really care what happens to Ukraine one way or another." As George Will has pointed out, Vance's defeatism and worries about the costs of supporting Ukraine carried distinct echoes of Taft's pre-World War II view that any aid the U.S. gave to Britain would be wasted and lost to an inevitable German victory.

The normalization of an isolationist strain that had long lain dormant in the party has been, unsurprisingly given the history of

America First, accompanied by the normalization of antisemitism.

Trump has dined at Mar-a-Lago with Holocaust denier Nick Fuentes, who has also organized an America First political action committee and told conspiracy monger Alex Jones that “Jews have no place in Western Civilization because they are not Christian.” Marjorie Taylor Greene has spoken at Fuentes’s America First Conference and suggested that wildfires in California were caused by space lasers funded by the Rothschilds. Tucker Carlson, a key media voice of Trumpism, decried conservative editor and talk-show host Ben Shapiro’s support for Israel after the October 7 attacks, resurrecting the dual-loyalty trope by accusing him and others of being “focused on a conflict in a foreign country as their own country becomes dangerously unstable.”

Trump has also sought to distract from his association with well-known antisemites by pointing to his many ties to prominent Jews, including his attorneys and, of course, the conversion of his daughter Ivanka to Judaism in order to marry her husband, Jared Kushner. Trump supporters also point to his undoubted accomplishment in presiding over the negotiation of the Abraham Accords, which marked the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.

But the larger question remains of whether or not the isolationist America First tendencies that Trump has expressed, and that are now increasingly powerful in the Republican Party, threaten American support for Israel in the long run. American foreign policy is frequently depicted as either the pursuit of ideals or interests, as if that were a binary choice. In fact, both have always played a role going back to the founding of the country. And common values of freedom, democracy, and respect for the rule of law and human rights have underpinned the U.S.–Israel relationship since the latter’s founding in 1948. Devaluing those elements will corrode the relationship over the long run.

America and Israel have had a strong security relationship since the 1960s, and Israel now receives from the United States both long-term security assistance and emergency military aid since

the beginning of the war in Gaza. Questioning American alliances and depicting them as purely economic transactions—or, more crudely, as protection rackets—will inevitably bleed over into discussions of the U.S.-Israel relationship. As the America First faction grows in power inside the Republican Party, the anti-semitism that accompanies it will begin to undermine support for Israel over the long haul.



The liberal, rules-based international order is an abstraction that frequently obscures more than it illuminates. At its core, it consists of the system of military and political alliances and an economic order that sought to lower tariff barriers to global growth. It was premised on what seemed self-evident in the immediate aftermath of titanic and destructive conflict: that the U.S. could not stand aloof from the rest of the world and that the balance of power in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East were interconnected and of fundamental importance to the peace and prosperity of Americans.

That order is now under attack from within and without: first, from authoritarian aggressors such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, which seek to revise global arrangements to make the world safe for autocracy and theocracy; second, from illiberal democrats and populist nationalists within, who seek to make the world safe for autarchy and autochthony.

In the U.S., that populist nationalism has drawn on a long-quiet tradition that has been reawakened and reinvigorated by Trumpism. A recrudescing America First policy will undermine American alliances and likely promote nuclear proliferation as nations pursue “*sauve qui peut*” policies. It will allow long-suppressed conflicts, previously tamped down by U.S. security guarantees, to resume and reemerge as security competitions. It will contribute to the global “democratic recession” by diminishing support for the rule of law and human rights. And it will undermine a key pillar

of the postwar order—American global leadership and its ability to provide a framework for collective action among nations. The consequences could be disastrous in the short run for Ukraine and in the longer run for Israel, and down the road for Taiwan. It would lead inevitably to a progressively more disordered and dangerous world.

What is to be done?

First, if Donald Trump emerges as the Republican nominee, it is imperative that he meet defeat at the polls. Whatever criticisms one has of President Biden and his policies, his reelection would not present the kind of challenge that a victorious Trumpism would to both U.S. democracy and support for America's most important comparative strategic advantage—its system of alliances.

It will also be crucial to support, in primaries as well as general elections, Republicans and Democrats who demonstrate a commitment to the system of alliances and the trade order that have undergirded the international system since 1945. That commitment, given the challenges we face in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, will also require continued investment in national defense that will enable the U.S. to play its role as “the arsenal of democracy” that both Roosevelt and Biden have championed.

Defeating the America First challenge will also require a fundamental reassertion by Democrats and Republicans that American values, and particularly support for democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights, are central to our foreign policy. It is within the framework of those values that the U.S.-Israel alliance can best be defended and sustained. America supports Israel neither out of charity nor because of Jewish influence in American politics. Rather, we do so for the same reason America should support the security of all free nations—both as a good in itself, and because doing so is the strongest and surest guarantee of our own freedom, security, and continued prosperity.

My generation of conservatives knows these things—or used to. The time is getting late to make sure younger conservatives learn this history, too, lest they repeat it with the same tragic consequences. *

VIVIAN BERCOVICI

Foreign Ministries

*What to do when diplomats
subvert elected officials*



IN LATE DECEMBER, the murder by Hamas of a Canadian-Israeli citizen, 70-year-old Judith Weinstein Haggai of Kibbutz Nir Oz, was confirmed. As has been their habit, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly, and Canada's ambassador to Israel, Lisa Stadelbauer, were all silent.

I was not.

My rebuke of the Canadian ambassador on X (formerly Twitter) provoked a response from one Wendy Gilmour, a former senior Canadian diplomat who, until quite recently, served as NATO's assistant secretary general for defense investment. "You seem happy profiting in the grief of others," she wrote. "As another former Head of Mission who should know better, this disgusts me."

That the stereotype of the Jew as a profiteer in human misery

resurfaced in the bilious rant of a Canadian foreign-policy expert lays bare the point of this essay.



Throughout my time as Canada’s ambassador to Israel, I was (and continue to be) subjected to abusive vitriol from the “professional” diplomatic corps. From the day that my appointment was announced by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs mobilized to promote their view that I, as a Jew, was by definition neither trustworthy nor loyal to Canada. It was a rearguard battle I was forced to fight during my 30-month tenure, from January 2014 to June 2016.

The tendency to denigrate and mistrust Jews taints not just Ottawa, but the foreign-policy machines in Washington, London, and elsewhere: a broad sweep, but one that is anchored in history. As with all institutions, there is a dominant culture in diplomatic services—even as there are many honorable exceptions. And the “Jewish issue” has long presented special challenges.

Paris, 1919: Representatives of the great powers finalized the terms for a lasting peace. In addition to sealing the defeat (and humiliation) of Germany through economic subjugation, the Allies set about carving the map of the Middle East. The demise of the Ottoman Empire presented opportunities for the victors to formalize their power in territories of interest. Lines were drawn, many ruler-straight, reflecting extraterritorial ambitions rather than any natural boundaries dictated by terrain or national movements. The imposition of the nation-state model was a force fit in a region of tribes, sects, ethnicities, and clans. But safeguarding European interests in the region dictated friendly relations with the new Arab regimes. It was in these years that the Arabist approach to Middle East foreign policy became entrenched in the diplomatic corps.

Following the rise to power of the Nazi Party in Germany, the Western nations were tested afresh. After the Anschluss in March

Prime Minister Harper’s announcement of my appointment was received with public derision by retired and still-current diplomats. My Jewish identity, some said publicly, impaired my ability to fulfill my professional duties with honor.

1938, persecution of German and Austrian Jews intensified, and they were desperate to find refuge. In response, President Roosevelt convened the Evian Conference in July of that year. His callousness toward the distress of Europe’s Jews has been well documented. Before the conference, Roosevelt reassured many invitees that there would be no pressure to increase Jewish immigration quotas.

Thirty-two nations attended as full participants in the French resort town to consider solutions to the “Jewish problem.” Other governments and many organizations were granted observer status, among them the Histadrut labor organization in Mandatory Palestine, represented by Golda Meyerson.

Later known as Golda Meir, Meyerson listened as each country politely demurred and explained their refusal to accept Jewish refugees. No need for more “traders.” No desire to “import racial issues.” “We’ve done enough already.” (A year later, Frederick Blair, Canada’s minister of mines and resources, with responsibility for immigration matters, would be asked how many Jewish refugees should be admitted to Canada. “None is too many,” he replied.) Only the Dominican Republic agreed to receive 100,000 Jewish refugees, to cultivate agricultural land of questionable potential.

Speaking to the press when the conference concluded, Meyerson

was reportedly emotional and enraged. Years later, in her retirement, she recalled Evian as a “turning point” in her life. “I realized then that a world which is not necessarily antisemitic—because Hitler was denounced at the conference and there was considerable pro-Jewish sentiment—could stand by and see others who were weaker victimized. . . . We can’t depend on any others.”

Also attending Evian were Nazi Party observers who returned to Germany with a message for Adolf Hitler: Nobody cares about the Jews. We can do what we want with them.



When the full extent of the horrors that Nazis had perpetrated against Jews became known after the war’s end, the “issue” arose again: What to do with the Jews?

In the unrest following the end of the war, Western democracies were preoccupied with containing the expansion of Communism on the European continent. Tens of millions of European civilians were displaced, with Jews a mere fraction of them. In spite of the unique tragedy that had ravaged Europe’s Jews, the sympathy of the West was hardly overwhelming. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish survivors of Nazi genocide were left to languish in displaced-persons camps, often for years. No country rushed to give them refuge.

British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin expressed distaste at the pressure being applied on the U.K. to allow in greater numbers of postwar refugees. “I am very anxious that Jews shall not in Europe over-emphasize their racial position,” he said in 1945, following extensive briefings from his Foreign Office staff. “If the Jews, with all their sufferings, want to get too much at the head of the queue, you have the danger of another antisemitic reaction through it all.” In the immediate wake of the Holocaust, Bevin crassly invoked the stereotype of the “pushy Jew” to explain his policy.

Statehood for the Jewish people presented an even more significant threat to Western diplomats than immigration did. Britain

was keen to maintain its oil supply from Arab producers while preserving its hold on the Suez Canal. It also wanted to avoid the ire of India's large and increasingly restive Muslim population as it managed its pending withdrawal from the former crown jewel of its empire. For all these reasons, support for the establishment of a Jewish state elicited virulent opposition from the British Foreign Office. Bevin also smarted from the humiliation of the British retreat from Mandatory Palestine. Britain deferred formal recognition of Israel to January 1949.

American diplomats had a different concern—that a Jewish state led by a socialist prime minister would be aligned with the Soviet Union, which had provided Israel with many of the weapons with which it won independence. Much of the international support for the early Zionist movement came from its association with left-wing organizations, which enjoyed a surge in popularity in Europe in the postwar period. George Marshall, the secretary of state, aggressively and persistently undermined President Truman's support for immediate recognition by America of the newly declared Jewish state. Truman prevailed, but it was not for two decades—until the 1967 Six-Day War—that U.S. foreign policy began to tilt toward Israel as it proved its worth as a Cold War ally.

Then there was Canada, which took a full year after Israel declared its independence before recognizing the Jewish state and later, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, went out of its way to court Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization. In these pages, the late Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney directly acknowledged the institutional antisemitism in Ottawa's diplomatic corps: "I appointed Norman Spector as Canada's first Jewish ambassador to Israel, smashing the odious myth of dual loyalties that had prevented Jews from serving in that position for 40 years."

More than 20 years later, Prime Minister Harper's announcement of my appointment was received with public derision by retired and still-current diplomats. My Jewish identity, some said publicly, impaired my ability to fulfill my professional duties with honor. I

was, by definition, disloyal. At a gathering in Toronto in September 2016 to recognize my service, Harper said that in his 10 years in office, the most difficult department for his government to work with was Foreign Affairs. The “Israel file,” he added, consistently caused the most friction, and he graciously acknowledged the degree of hostility I encountered “every single day” throughout my service.

I was not alone. During my tenure, the British ambassador to Israel, Matthew Gould, a career diplomat, shattered the Jewish glass ceiling at Whitehall. Gould’s appointment was controversial, initially and throughout his time in Israel. That he distinguished the office with exemplary service was of no consequence. As with every Jewish diplomat serving in the Middle East, his religious and ethnic identity indelibly tainted his integrity in the eyes of many.



Today, in the aftermath of October 7, Jews are being tested to a degree unmatched since the Holocaust, both by Islamists intent on annihilating the Jewish state and by Western progressives determined to make political, moral, and material support for Israel all but impossible. President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have steadfastly supported Israel in the face of strong global opposition—over vociferous dissent among the ranks of State Department officials. Blinken’s skill in managing these pressures will be tried in the coming months and possibly years. A full-frontal assault on Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist is just building momentum internationally.

The challenge is how to manage, confront, and defeat such determined adversaries. Jewish communal organizations in the Diaspora have tended to favor an approach of appeasement. They take pains not to alienate or offend, preferring to strive to please, to show how self-effacing and *not* aggressive they are. These mollifying approaches will only perpetuate prejudice.

In the summer of 2015, a year after Israel’s war with Hamas

in the Gaza Strip, I was invited to a dinner of European diplomats. The topic of discussion was the announced intention of the European Union to pass legislation permitting the labeling of products originating, even in part, from places of business located in the West Bank. Consumers, the EU felt strongly, ought to know whether their purchase was supporting the occupation and all that supposedly entailed.

Ayelet Shaked, then the minister of justice in the Israeli government, joined for the first hour to discuss the Israeli opposition to such a measure.

After she left, the room heated up. A lot. Support for the measure was strident among many of the 10 attendees. Others were quiet. Canada did not support the legislation for a number of reasons. I sat there, wanting to disappear, but not allowing myself that option.

“Tell me,” I asked one of the more vocal ambassadors supporting the legislation. “Has the EU ever considered—never mind drafted—similar legislation to apply to any other country in the world?” I presented the question in that way because it reflected the principled position of Prime Minister Harper. While he may not have supported Israel at all times, what he did object to was the manner in which it was constantly the target of diplomatic bullying. It was well known among the diplomatic and foreign-policy community that this particular legislation had been drafted years earlier and was ready to be dusted off. Many EU members pounced at what they perceived to be the opportunity to get it passed.

The answer to my question, of course, was negative. Which, again, speaks volumes.

And it clearly hit a nerve. The diplomat to whom I had addressed the question—who made no secret of a strong personal contempt for Israel (contrary to the policy of the diplomat’s government)—sat back, crossed arms, and asked me, with attitude, “So, Vivian. What are your personal views on the topic?”

To which I responded: “My personal views are irrelevant. As are yours. I represent the policy of the government of Canada.”

Jewish communal organizations in the
Diaspora have tended to favor an approach
of appeasement.

What to do?

In the postwar years, foreign-affairs bureaucracies in Western democracies ballooned in size. Foreign-service officers saw themselves as better-informed and -trained to manage diplomatic complexities than the elected officials they supposedly served. They also mastered the art of diffusing responsibility and outcomes among the many layers and offices engaged in any particular issue. As a practical matter, this means that neither success nor failure is attributed to individuals, resulting in a lack of accountability throughout the organization. It also means that internal sabotage of the will of government is more easily effected and concealed. Where authority and responsibility are blurred, accountability is impossible.

When public servants consider it appropriate and justifiable to subvert the policy of elected officials, that is a serious problem. It is also, surprisingly, easily managed, provided there is sustained political will.

A quite straightforward remedy for diplomatic high-handedness is for elected officials to appoint executives in the foreign-policy bureaucracy who understand and accept their role as advisers. To a degree, this practice is already in place in the State Department, where the top layers are hand-picked by elected officials. But this practice is much less prevalent in His Majesty's Diplomatic Service, and not at all in Global Affairs Canada.

Even deputy ministers (the equivalent of a deputy secretary) tend to be recruited from the public-service ranks in Canada and the U.K. Their loyalty inclines toward their bureaucratic colleagues and institutions over elected officials. It is virtually impossible to successfully implement any policy when the most powerful people in the bureaucratic structure are opposed.

Early in my service, I was called to Ottawa for two weeks of “Head of Mission” training with the class of 2014, for those assuming ambassadorial postings. When then–Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Daniel Jean spoke to the group, the first question he was asked astonished me: “What do we do if—as happens frequently with this government—we propose a particular policy approach and it is not accepted by the minister’s office?”

In response, Jean reminded my colleagues that we served in a Westminster-style democracy, meaning that our role was to advise and execute but not to decide. Decision-making was within the exclusive purview of elected officials who were ultimately accountable to the people who put them in public office. Jean further took the opportunity to share with the group that, of the various prime ministers he had served over his decades-long career, Harper was the most deferential to and respectful of the expertise of the public service. “He follows our advice 85 percent of the time,” Jean shared. “And when he does not do so, it is invariably for a very sound political reason.”

This vignette makes clear the imperative of elected political interests to take control of the machinery of government. To accomplish this, a much greater degree of accountability must be introduced into the system.

Prime Minister Harper was clear from the outset that he appointed me, an Ottawa outsider but political insider, to mitigate the manner in which career foreign-service officers had undermined his policies regarding Israel and the Middle East. What he expected from the system was professionalism and loyalty. What he encountered in his 10 years in office was a foreign service saturated with

antisemitism, hostility toward Israel, and a deep loathing of his government's policy in this particular matter.

Ultimately, there can be only two remedies to the challenge. The first is that foreign-policy bureaucracies find ways to reform themselves. Senior officials can discipline recalcitrant diplomats who openly and persistently flout the views of the elected government. They can recruit officials, including those in mid- or even late-career, with more diverse professional experience and a wider range of skills to bring to the role. They can take care that there is genuine viewpoint diversity in their ranks to avoid the dreary intellectual groupthink that tends to take hold in government ministries. The reality is that fiscal pressures have forced many foreign-service bureaucracies to engage in such reform, but they have done so half-heartedly and tended to focus on entitlements and perquisites rather than systemic dysfunction. They are a powerful bloc interest and maintain the advantage of controlling the system. Elected government officials come and go. That certainty is the source of bureaucratic resistance to reform.

The second—and companion—remedy would have elected governments appoint or remove officials in the middle and even lower ranks of the service, eventually altering if not breaking the model of a permanent bureaucracy. That's a far more radical step that would meet fierce resistance from the bureaucracies and their media allies, and require sustained political will. But it may be the only way in which elected governments can do what they are supposed to do: carry out the will of the people, irrespective of the views of their supposed betters. *

DEPARTURES



ANSHEL PFEFFER

Postcard from Suriname

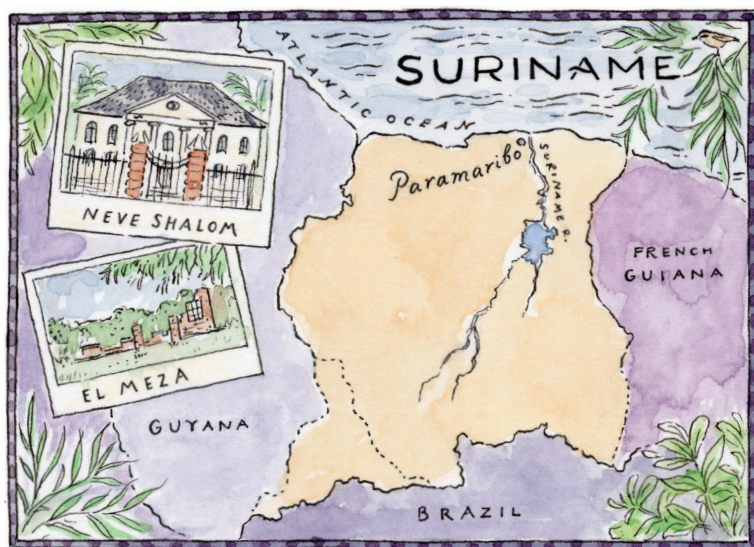
*Lessons from a Jewish state
that didn't make it*



THE BOATMAN cuts his outboard motor and the rusty launch drifts with the sluggish current of the Suriname River. Try as I might, even with the help of two Parbo Biers, I can't conjure up a Jewish community along these green banks—much less a realm of Jewish autonomy where Shabbat-keeping plantation owners held sway over the rainforest.

I've been to the oldest as well as some of the newest shuls in the world across six continents. I've found traces of them where they've ceased to exist. You don't have to tell me that Jews come in all shapes and colors. But somehow, this doesn't add up: Jews overseeing slaves, carving out fields in the New World jungle, producing sugar to be sent back to Europe, and, on Fridays, taking their boats to gather in prayer at their regional capital for Shabbat.

It sounds like science fiction. But back on dry land, in two



cemeteries almost swallowed up by the forest, rows and rows of dark marble slabs with names and Torah quotations carved in Hebrew letters prove that Jodensavanne — Dutch for “Jewish savanna” — was real.

It’s an unknown slice of Jewish history — one in which the Jews banished from Spain and Portugal made their way in the thousands to South America and established an independent Jewish commonwealth on the banks of one of its wide rivers. A haven for a persecuted nation. A Jewish state, almost 300 years before Israel.

Over a century or so, it prospered, struggled, and was abandoned. Instead of becoming a new and thriving Zion, Suriname, which gained its independence from the Netherlands only in 1975, is today the smallest country in South America and also one of its poorest. The tiny Jewish community, the oldest in the Americas, barely maintains its sole remaining shul in Paramaribo, the capital. Meanwhile, downriver, a small group of archaeologists is working to uncover and preserve what remains.

I visited Suriname in early September, a month before the Hamas attack. I had been invited to join a small archaeological delegation of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA); they had been asked by the

Jodensavanne Foundation, with the backing of the Surinamese government and the funding of the Inter-American Development Bank, to carry out a survey and help prepare a preservation plan.

Joining Israeli archaeologists on a jungle dig 6,000 miles away sounded so fantastical that I immediately said yes. Now, of course, revisiting my notes is surreal: Shortly after my trip, IAA archaeologists were in the headlines for their work on devastated kibbutzim, helping pathologists sift through burnt-out ruins for any trace that could help determine whether those missing were dead or might still be alive, captive in Gaza.

And yet, the questions that came to mind, which I jotted in the margins of my notebook, are suddenly more relevant than ever. What does a Jewish community need in order to survive and thrive in hostile conditions? What kind of support must it have from Jews elsewhere? What level of coexistence with the neighboring cultures and communities is necessary for self-preservation?



Like the other Jews who arrived in America in the centuries after Columbus, the Jews of Suriname descended from Jews banished from Spain and then Portugal. They settled first in the West Indies, Brazil, and Guiana, but Catholic persecution continued there. Suriname, however, was under Anglican English rule, and in 1656, Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell overturned Edward I's 1290 expulsion of the Jews. This policy extended to the colonies; in Suriname, Jews were granted equal rights with other colonists in 1665. Those rights remained in effect after the English handed Suriname to the Dutch two years later in exchange for New Amsterdam, which they renamed New York.

The Jewish families arriving in this new land brought experience growing sugarcane and refining it into the sugar, much sought after in Europe, that became the colony's main source of revenue. There are records by the early-18th century of at least 115 Jewish plantations — more than half of all those in Suriname — extending upriver

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over hundreds of square miles. Slaves, mostly brought from Africa by the Dutch West India Company, worked the plantations. The Jewish community was also in charge of the militia that protected the plantations and the new capital at the river mouth from slave uprisings and indigenous Amerindian tribes.

For roughly a century, this Jewish colony was the only place in the world where Jews enjoyed self-rule between the downfall of the Hasmonean kingdom in the second century and Israel's independence in 1948.

But after a few decades of prosperity, the community began to decline. French corsairs overwhelmed their defenses and stole huge quantities of sugar. New techniques of producing sugar from beets made their cash crop unviable, and alternatives proved less profitable. The soil was depleted, but applications for new plantations were declined. Slave revolts also took their toll. Families gradually began abandoning the plantations, some moving to Paramaribo, others emigrating to North America. A fire in 1832 destroyed some of the buildings in the main village, and the few remaining families left. Over the next century and a half, the Jewish plantations were reclaimed by the rainforest.



Today, the center of the main village has been cleared of trees, and the foundations of two buildings, the shul and the adjacent home of the El Meza family, have been excavated. Some of the shul's walls have

been partially restored, but there is little to suggest its original use, other than an entrance on each side, symbolizing Abraham's tent, and a brick platform on the eastern wall, where an ark once stood.

The floor has been covered with white sand, a tradition in the early synagogues of the Caribbean. A team of young local archaeologists works on the El Meza home and its outside cookhouse. It is like similar cookhouses attached to early colonial homes in other parts of Suriname, but for one detail: It has two ovens instead of one. Dairy and meat? Or perhaps the increased capacity is a sign of another halakhic feature of life in the village. If the community really was as observant as the records maintain, it would have meant spending entire Shabbats and holidays together in the main village, because most families lived miles upriver, boats their only mode of transport. The double oven at the cookhouse next to the shul would have allowed multiple families to keep hot their Shabbat lunches of *hamin* or *dafina*, the versions of cholent that Jews originally from Spain would prepare. Or perhaps it was *pom*, a dish of chicken or meat and arrowleaf elephant ear root, believed to be the cholent of Surinamese Jews and today a staple of the country's cuisine.

There is plenty of physical evidence in the foundations of the El Meza house. Hundreds of shards of kitchenware from Staffordshire in England and Delft in Holland, as well as a Chinese porcelain teacup and a serving platter with a Magen David, attest both to the splendor of the Shabbat meals and to how this far-flung colony traded with the world.

The ships coming over from Europe to take on loads of sugar didn't just carry Old World crockery. The community wanted slabs of black marble, too. In the next clearing, the slabs still lie, rows of elegantly carved gravestones. Paradoxically, this is where the story of Jodensavanne really comes to life. Four hundred sixty-two markers of Jews who died between 1685 and 1873 have been found in the main cemetery. There are over a hundred more at an older cemetery a couple of kilometers upriver. They are similar to graves from the corresponding period in the Jewish cemetery in Amsterdam. It

isn't clear whether they were ordered after death, engraved back in Europe, and then shipped over the Atlantic, or whether there was an expert engraver in Jodensavanne.

What is clear is that whoever drafted the inscriptions possessed deep Torah knowledge. Many gravestones are inscribed with a Torah verse that corresponds to the circumstances of the person's death, and whose gematria—the numeric value of the verse's Hebrew letters—matches the Hebrew year in which he died. A joyous verse for someone who lived to a ripe old age, a woeful one for someone who died in her prime or younger: There are many of those. This was a literate community—many of the inscriptions include original Hebrew poems describing the good deeds of the deceased and lamenting their passing. At the foot of the slab are drawings—the tools of the trade of architects and doctors, a mohel bending down to perform a circumcision. Many graves of Kohanim are marked with palms spread in the priestly benediction. And for those who died young, there are thorny rose bushes or cut-down trees.

Abraham Meiram, a wealthy businessman who died in 1720, is honored with the title of Gvir (other honorifics include Hacham) and is said to have owned the “Field of Efron,” like his biblical namesake. And his grave, like those of the more devout members of the community, is inscribed only in Hebrew. Others combine Hebrew and Ladino, along with Jewish and Gregorian dates. Two adjacent graves—of Emmanuel Pereyra, who died in 1738, and David Rodrigues Montanto, who died the next year—share the same terrible quote from Psalms: “O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongs. O God to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth!” Below, in Spanish, are the identical circumstances of their deaths: “Killed by the uprising negroes.”



I arrived in Suriname expecting that the centrality of slavery to the story of the Jewish plantations would be a big, sensitive issue. But while the presence and number of slaves who lived on the plantations

was noted on a few of the signs around the rather austere information center, it barely came up. It took me a few days to realize that such a small, young nation, barely 20 years after a civil war and still struggling to build a viable economy, has other priorities. Every strand of their national identity is too valuable to cancel. In a country whose population is such a mix of ethnicities—the descendants of slaves, indigenous Amerindian groups, and European colonists, as well as major Indonesian, Indian, and Chinese communities whose ancestors arrived as indentured laborers—Jews, barely present physically, are understood as an important part of Suriname’s history.

Why did the Jewish community not try adding to its number in order to survive? There are records of individual conversions performed by some of the members of Jodensavanne, but nothing on a scale that would have changed the community’s trajectory. No doubt, the aversion of rabbinical Judaism to proselytizing and the distance from the Amsterdam Beth Din that served Jodensavanne played a role. And yet, there were slaves and the descendants of slaves who wanted to be Jewish or considered themselves as such, especially those descended from female slaves impregnated by Jews. In the late-19th century, when the bulk of the community had moved to Paramaribo, the “black Jews” founded their own shul, Darhe Jesarim, in the capital.

It is also very likely that this particular Beth Din—which issued its cherem (excommunication) against Baruch Spinoza in 1656, just when Jews had started to arrive in Suriname, and has not lifted it since—wouldn’t have countenanced large-scale conversions of slaves and the unrecognized children of plantation owners. But there is also no sign that the Jews of Jodensavanne were eager to use conversion to increase their numbers.

In any case, many non-Jews in today’s Suriname take great pride in their Jewish roots. Harrold Sijlbing, a conservationist and the current chairman of the Jodensavanne Foundation, stands next to the grave of his ancestor David Cohen Nassy, one of the earliest leaders of Jodensavanne more than 350 years ago. “The story of what Nassy and his family went through until they arrived in Suriname is important to

me. At the same time, I'm very mindful that he was the owner of the slave-woman I am also descended from. This is what makes up our Surinamese identity." Jovan Samson, a young Surinamese archaeologist directing the new excavations of the El Meza house, helped by groups of high-school volunteers, says he is of part-Jewish ancestry as well. "I am a descendant both of the Jews and the Amerindians who lived here," he says. "I'm now discovering here my own story."

"If the community at Jodensavanne was interested in converting people to Judaism, there would have been a huge demand," says Sijlbing. "When the Moravian church began the first serious missionary work here, everyone became Moravians. But the Jews were here long before the Moravians. If the Jews had been prepared to convert more people, Suriname would probably be a Jewish state today."

Would that have been a good thing? Surely, having a Jewish state anywhere is good for Jews everywhere. Reinforcements could have been sent to preserve the only example of Jewish autonomy in the world. A Beth Din might have ruled that they could fast-track conversions to help tide them over economic hardships. As Jews fled the persecutions and pogroms of Eastern Europe, might some have been enticed to Suriname?

As the last of the early Jewish communities in South America neared its end, Jewish immigration to what would become the greatest community in the history of the Jewish Diaspora was gathering pace. Setting sail from the Baltic ports, the Jews escaping the Pale of Settlement were all heading for New York. Looking back, it seems inevitable. We are essentially an urban nation. Restore us to Zion—or at least to Manhattan. A Jewish commonwealth in the rainforest belongs to an alternative reality.



One place where I detected no enthusiasm for excavating and preserving Jodensavanne was in the tiny Jewish community of Paramaribo. There were once three shuls in the capital; now

there is one. The shul of the black Jews was destroyed and built over in the early-20th century when some of its members converted officially and were accepted by the two other shuls. Zedek ve'Shalom, built in 1736 for the Sephardi families who moved to the growing city from Jodensavanne, is still owned by the community, but it merged with the other remaining shul at the end of the last century.

What is left of Jewish life in Paramaribo centers around Neve Shalom, built in 1835 by Ashkenazi Jewish traders who never ventured farther inland. It is kept going by the income from Zedek ve'Shalom's building, now rented out to an IT company. All of its furnishings were dismantled and reassembled in Jerusalem, as part of the Israel Museum's collection of synagogues from around the world. Ironically, there was no shortage of Jewish philanthropists prepared to finance the shul's preservation in Jerusalem.

Today, there are an estimated 150 Jews in Paramaribo. Ninety are members of the community, half of them over 60. It's been a decade since a wedding or bar mitzvah took place here. Lilly Duym, the community's vice president and driving force, gives our delegation a tour of the ornate synagogue. It is in surprisingly good shape. Its white sand is fresh. The tiny museum contains numerous paintings and documents that record life in Jodensavanne, as well as religious artifacts that were used there. Some older Torah scrolls remain in the ark, although they are too mildewed to be read from during the Shabbat service.

But as eager as Lilly is to tell of her work keeping the community alive, she becomes reticent when talk turns to the preservation work in Jodensavanne. Her family, the Abravanel, arrived there 350 years ago, but her life has been dedicated to preserving the community in Paramaribo—including the heart-breaking decision to close Zedek ve'Shalom, where her family worshiped for nearly two centuries, and ship its contents to Jerusalem.

"The government here wants to make Jodensavanne into a national site," a community member whispers to me. "They hope

it will attract investment. They're less interested in helping us preserve Jewish life right here, where the Jews are." "It's a pity that no one from the Jewish community is on the board of the Jodensavanne Foundation," says Stephen Fokké, a senior civil servant in the Education Ministry and the energetic secretary of the foundation, somewhat cryptically. It seems that in a country of meager resources, there's room for only one Jewish heritage project, and it's not the one where actual Jews are currently living.



A few days after our visit, UNESCO recognized Jodensavanne as a site of Outstanding Universal Value. Will this help the Surinamese government, the Jodensavanne Foundation, and the local indigenous tribes to preserve the site and make it a viable tourist attraction? I'm not sure. I doubt we're about to see repeat visits by Israeli archaeologists and Jewish-American groups on bar mitzvah trips to help with the excavation and preservation. The Jewish world failed to come to Jodensavanne's aid 200 years ago, when it still offered the slender prospect of a self-ruling Jewish outpost in a hostile world, and it has other, burning priorities today.

But whether the homes and plantations are revealed and restored or remain hidden beneath the trees, Jodensavanne should feature in our collective Jewish memory. Today, it is an urgent reminder that maintaining Jewish autonomy has never been an easy task, which is why autonomous Jewish communities have been so rare in history. To guarantee their viability, they must adapt to changing times. But above all, self-sustainment is never enough. If there is to be Jewish autonomy anywhere, it needs the support of Jews everywhere. *

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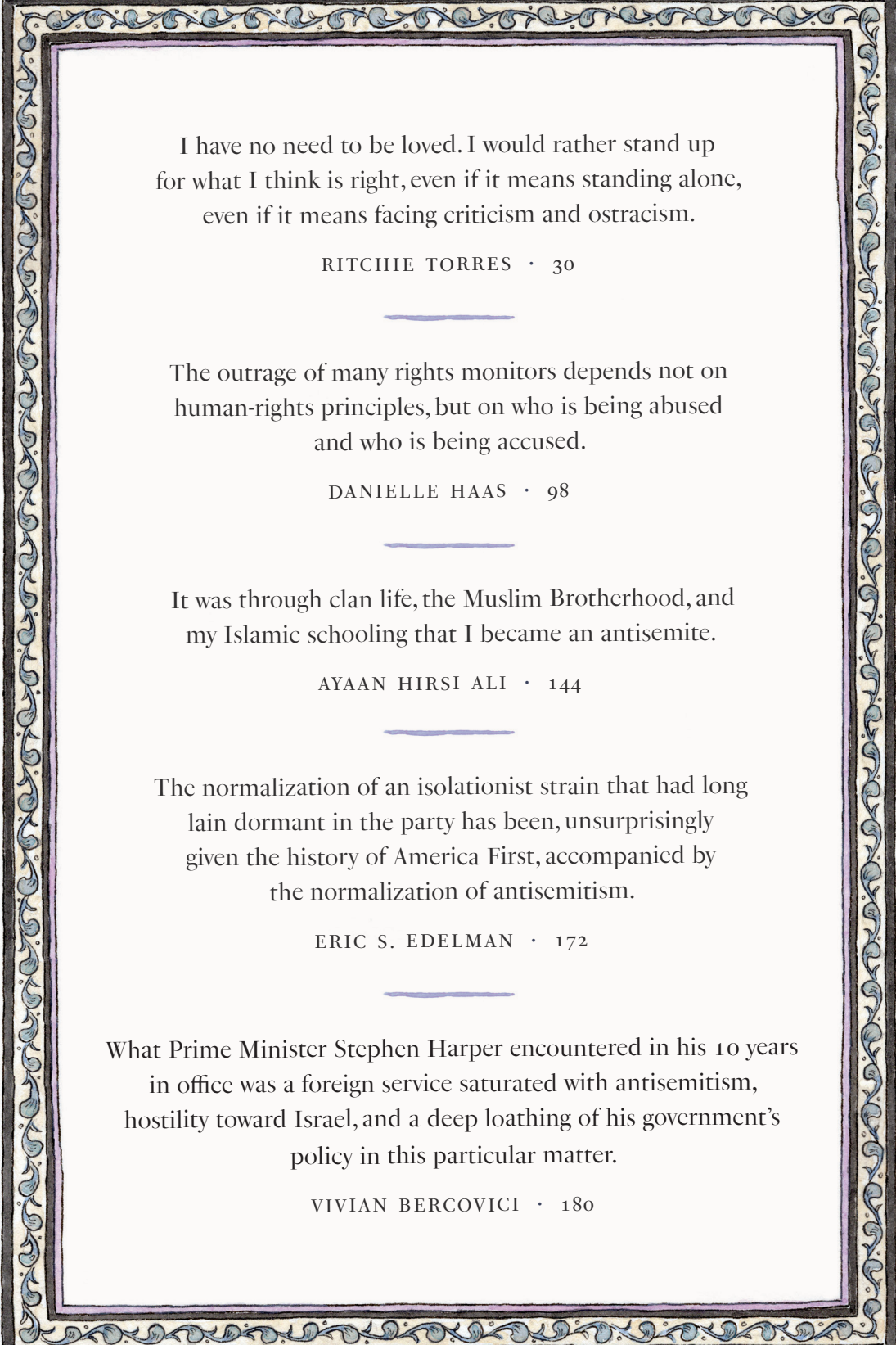


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וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת
רַגְלָיו כָּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבַנְת הַסִּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר:

— שמות כד:י



I have no need to be loved. I would rather stand up
for what I think is right, even if it means standing alone,
even if it means facing criticism and ostracism.

RITCHIE TORRES · 30

The outrage of many rights monitors depends not on
human-rights principles, but on who is being abused
and who is being accused.

DANIELLE HAAS · 98

It was through clan life, the Muslim Brotherhood, and
my Islamic schooling that I became an antisemite.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI · 144

The normalization of an isolationist strain that had long
lain dormant in the party has been, unsurprisingly
given the history of America First, accompanied by
the normalization of antisemitism.

ERIC S. EDELMAN · 172

What Prime Minister Stephen Harper encountered in his 10 years
in office was a foreign service saturated with antisemitism,
hostility toward Israel, and a deep loathing of his government's
policy in this particular matter.

VIVIAN BERCOVICI · 180