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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 fam-

ilies 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 @globalempowerment-mission good shabbos everyone, be safe .

For a b♥nd with an identity tied to Jud♥ica 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 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 Jew-y 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 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 emptily 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 commu-

nal 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 Tik-Toker, 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 "influencery" 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. *