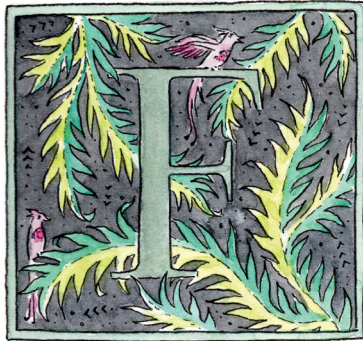


NOA TISHBY

The Courage To Be Uncool

American Jews can't be bystanders when we're targets



FEELING LIKE an outsider is nothing new to me. Things seem peachy now, but as a child I was not what you would call a popular kid. I had a buzz cut and looked like a boy, with teeth almost the size of my face. The buzz cut was due to the fact that I was far more popular with the head lice that frequently took up residence in my hair than I was with my peers. Being an only child of divorced parents, which was fairly uncommon in 1980s Israel, didn't help. I developed a tolerance for the discomfort that came with feeling uncool, on the outside of the in-crowd.

Arriving in Hollywood as a young adult and trying to make it in the entertainment industry while constantly yapping on about Israel felt the same way—what I had to say would, many times, put me on the outside. I know for some this might feel like a new phenomenon; however, I can tell you that Israel was never a popular cause

in polite circles, at least not since 1967 (before I was born). Moving in these performative circles, I heard statements about Israel that I knew to be flat-out wrong. Conditioned by my uncool childhood, I was more comfortable speaking up and challenging my peers than I was performing and playing along for acceptance. I was happy to be unpopular rather than keep quiet and pretty, which is how Hollywood prefers its young girls.

I have lost many friends because of this over the years. A few years ago, one friend insisted that anti-Zionism was not the same as antisemitism, and that if I carried on publicly stating that they were the same, we could no longer be friends. That was the last I heard from him. Wielding friendship and social acceptance as a threat has little power over someone who learned early in life not to mistake other people's views of oneself for truth. Truth does not depend on what other people think. If stating it has cost me friendships and work, neither was ever worthwhile.

That uncool and unsafe feeling of outsiderdom is something that many of us are experiencing today as individuals and as a community. For many of us, it happened suddenly, with head-spinning speed. The largest and worst slaughter of Jews in one day since the Holocaust became quickly transformed on social media from a moment of unambiguous hatred into one of righteous decolonization. Within hours of the massacre, seemingly in the blink of an eye, anti-Israel sentiment became a trendy vibe. People we thought were our friends and allies were quick to join the celebratory protests and grievance encampments.

The question is: If it was so sudden, why does it all feel so strangely familiar, even to those of us who have lived comfortable, fully assimilated lives seemingly so distant from antisemitism?

I think the answer lies in our highly uncool past. When October 7 happened, on a deep level, we all knew exactly what was going on. We

had heard about it from our grandparents, and though we thought they were crazy when they said “it” will return, we still knew we were part of the same story: the recurring persecution and mass violence that have dogged Jews across history. The popular Israeli sketch comedy show *The Jews Are Coming* encapsulated this reality in “Never Again All Over Again,” its first release since October 7. In a break from the usual satire, there isn’t a laugh to be had in this sketch; instead, it offers a succession of survivor testimonies along the dark seams of our past and present, beginning with a mother after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and progressing through Cologne after the 1096 Rhineland massacres, the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, the 1929 Hebron massacres, Kristallnacht in 1938 Berlin, Baghdad in 1943 — and Kfar Aza in 2023.

What haunts us, even those of us who have lived through only the most recent pogrom, is the familiarity of even the oldest testimony. “We were awakened by a terrifying noise, we didn’t know what was happening...” two millennia ago in Jerusalem. “We realized they’d broken into our neighbors’ house. . . . We heard them screaming until silence fell. We thought of escaping into the forest, but everyone who tried to escape found it was impossible” one millennium ago in Cologne. This history has shaped us: “Deep inside I know it,” each survivor says in unison as they stand together at the close of the video. The weight of our past is in our blood.

Perhaps literally. Recent studies suggest that these traumatic stories have become woven into our hereditary fabric through epigenetic change. Epigenetic changes are additions to our DNA that influence the way our genetic code is read by our bodies. Studies show that epigenetic change can occur from traumatic experience, and that these changes can be inherited. The idea is intuitive to us: It’s long been suggested that historical traumas can be psychologically passed down from generation to generation. Epigenetic fear is the biological man-

ifestation of historical traumas alongside our genetic code. A review found that “there is now converging evidence supporting the idea that offspring are affected by parental trauma exposures occurring before their birth, and possibly even prior to their conception.” One study found that “in the absence of their own traumatic exposures, offspring of Holocaust survivors” were more likely to exhibit biological signs associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Other studies have suggested that epigenetic changes can be passed down for many generations.

After the pogrom of October 7 and the global reactions to it, our epigenetic inheritance may have been activated in our veins. As the researcher behind the study of offspring of Holocaust survivors observed, “Epigenetic changes often serve to biologically prepare offspring for an environment similar to that of the parents.”

In this respect, Jews have a built-in mechanism that gives acts of barbarism against us a certain familiarity and triggers an almost automatic response. Though the threats have come from different neighbors — Romans, Germans, Baghdadis — across time and place, they have always been similar enough to inoculate us against being truly surprised.

This inoculation is one of the secrets to our resilience. The pain and trauma we’ve absorbed for thousands of years is just enough (or perhaps a bit more than enough) so that when, as evidently occurs every few generations, Jew-haters seek to marginalize, ostracize, massacre, displace, rape, mutilate and burn us alive, we instinctively understand what is happening and we know how to act.

Trauma, inherited or direct, can have many possible impacts. At the worst end of the spectrum, if left untreated and unresolved, it becomes PTSD. This threat looms over Israel at the moment. Survivors of October 7 who witnessed unimaginable horror will need to receive extensive treatment to prevent the onset of PTSD. With

hundreds of thousands of Israelis still displaced and living in temporary accommodation — and given the scale of the barbarism that decimated their communities, in a tiny country where everyone is connected to everyone else — the wounds could take decades to heal.

But there is another response to trauma, one equally present in our inheritance: post-traumatic growth (PTG). PTG is the phenomenon through which people experience positive psychological changes following a life crisis or traumatic event. That can include changes in how they relate to other people, an understanding of new opportunities and priorities, a greater appreciation for the value of one's own life, recognition of one's own strength and spiritual development. When I first learned about the concept of PTG, I knew intuitively what it was. Perhaps, just like the trauma, it is encoded in our inheritance.

The readiness of our former friends to justify the October 7 pogrom was matched by the readiness of the previously silent in our community to begin raising their voices. As has been noted in these pages, 30,000 new donors contributed to UJA-Federation of New York's Israel Emergency Fund. This, at a moment when groupthink and cool coalescence on campus happens around anti-Israel encampments, is a case of PTG. Speaking up for what is true, regardless of whether or not it is popular, easy, or comfortable, and even when it puts us outside of mainstream popular opinion is also an act of reconnection with the essence of Jewishness itself. It is the positive activation of our inheritance.

From our inception, the Jewish people have been shaped and defined by those prepared to sacrifice their own comfort and place within the mainstream to stand up for what is right. The courage to be uncool. From Moses leaving the comfort of Pharaoh's palace to stand with Israelite slaves to the Jews who marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma to the Zionists who laid the foundations of the modern State of Israel, being Jewish has never been about being comfortable or being popular. Embroidered onto our DNA, we may just carry the

blessings of being uncool. (That is why we outlive all of our enemies.)

With the Jewish people facing greater hostility and more intense threats than we have in decades, an increasing number are responding not by lying low but by standing tall. The trauma of the past months and the subsequent (and inevitable) PTG will bring about the following realization: that the Jews who were prepared to risk being unpopular or contentious carry in their blood the millennia of turbulent Jewish history, whose legacy we inherit and whose mantle we pass on.

My grandmother arrived in Israel before the Holocaust, but her older sister Gita survived the horrors of Europe in a way that would traumatize anyone. She hid underneath a pile of slaughtered bodies, including those of her two children, her husband, and everyone else in her town, until darkness fell and she climbed out from under the bloody corpses and ran to the forest nearby. She eventually made her way to Israel, saved in body, but forever scarred in soul. Gita wasn't around much when I was growing up. She spent most of her time hiding in my grandmother's kitchen cabinets, screaming, searching for her children. The psychological torment that plagued Gita for the rest of her days is unimaginable.

With tears in her eyes, Nova survivor Noam Ben David—young, pretty, bohemian, she looks like an artist from Venice Beach, not a relic of the Jewish past—told me nearly exactly the same story. She hid, along with two other people, all three pretending to be dead, under a pile of 13 slaughtered bodies, including that of her late boyfriend David. I say “nearly exactly” because rather than running into the forest nearby, where festival goers were also gunned down, she was saved hours later by the IDF—which didn't exist when Gita lost her family and everyone she knew.

If you are reading this, chances are you are descended from those who were put through trials and tribulations and endured them. We

are all survivors. As a people, we are used to being uncool, and we know what it's like to be unsafe. It's not fun, or comfortable, but we have been here before and we know what to do. Whether you know it or not, on a profound level, you are a part of this organic chain. You are here. You are alive, and you are reading these words. You were inoculated too. *