

S A P I R

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

HIGH HOLIDAYS READER



5785 · 2024

WELCOME

THE HIGH HOLIDAYS are an opportunity to refresh our minds, spirits, and relationships; to spend time in community; to pray for a rewarding personal and collective future; to worship the transcendent; and to reaffirm commitments to ideals larger than ourselves. Those commitments—to a flourishing and secure state of Israel; a Diaspora that is deeply knowledgeable about, and fiercely proud of, Jewish thought and tradition; responsible innovation; unencumbered and high-quality education; grit; growth; the bridging of divisions within and without the Jewish community; continuity as a people; faith (broadly defined); meaningful and lasting contributions to the human story—have never been more important than they are today.

In the past year we have witnessed unimaginable tragedy, but also incredible resolve. As we enter 5785, let us all recommit to the principles above. In that spirit, we are pleased to offer this selection of readings from previous issues, selected for their relevance to the themes of this powerful and inspiring time of the year.

All best wishes for a *shana tova u'metuka*—a sweet and happy new year.

—The SAPIR team

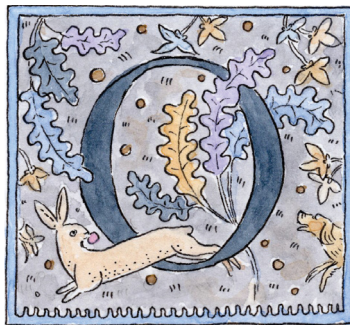
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AMMIEL HIRSCH

It Is Still October 7

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



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

ing 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?

This article originally appeared in the issue on Friends & Foes (Vol. 12, Winter 2024).

Zionism

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

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

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

October 7 shattered our faith in this, Zionism's most basic commitment. Hundreds were massacred, brutalized, tortured, abused, and kidnapped, while the state itself was largely absent. Two hundred

thousand Israelis became homeless in their national home. One shudders to contemplate the dimensions of the catastrophe had Hezbollah also invaded from the north on that Simchat Torah day.

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

Antisemitism

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

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

One of the saddest developments since October 7 is the shock experienced by American Jews who are encountering pervasive antisemitism for the first time in their universities and schools, at work, on social media, in threats to their synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions, and on the streets of their hometowns. The realization that age-old hatreds are still alive and kicking, even here — especially here — has plunged our community into a crisis of confidence in American exceptionalism. We are beginning to hear

echoes of Europe, the howls of hatred that brought our ancestors to these shores in the first place.

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

Western Liberalism

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

No matter what atrocities the Palestinian national movement commits, it is American and Western progressives more than conservatives who hem and haw and find ways to justify terrorism. Universities, elite public and private schools, feminist and human-rights organizations, and far too many more institutions allegedly devoted to justice, truth, and freedom failed to muster the basic human compassion to empathize with the victims of Hamas, let alone to condemn the perpetrators, even before Israel responded militarily. Longtime interfaith colleagues who showered us with

support after the Pittsburgh massacre—our friends with whom we initiated many communal projects for peace, tolerance, and religious understanding—were silent. Not only did many progressives avoid condemning Hamas, they considered the massacres legitimate resistance to a supposedly genocidal settler-colonial state that needed to be eliminated. As one speaker emphasized at an Oakland city-council debate: “It is a contradiction to be pro-humanity and pro-Israel.”

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

What business do progressives have defending those who oppress women, gays, minorities, and Christians? How could feminist organizations not condemn horrific sexual violence against Israeli women? How to explain that the very people who insist that women should always be believed when reporting sexual assaults now demand proof from Israelis and refuse to accept the starkest evidence in front of their eyes? What to make of climate activists taking time out of their

day and money out of their coffers to oppose Israel, as if there is some insidious intersectional interplay between the supposed evils of the Jewish state and the perils of climate change?

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

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

The Virtues of Moderation

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

I assume that future Israeli commissions of inquiry will investigate in minute detail the monumental strategic, operational, and political failures of October 7. But what seems clear to me already at this preliminary stage is that part of what went wrong was the unprecedented political empowerment of hyper-nationalists and

religious fundamentalists in the months before the attacks. Of all the grave transgressions that Prime Minister Netanyahu has committed, among the most egregious is the normalization of forces in Jewish political life that should never be granted such access to power. Predictably, within weeks of the formation of the current government, ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious elements polarized the country, with the support and encouragement of Netanyahu.

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

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

In America, the aftermath of October 7 has exposed the growing challenges we face in preventing the fracturing of our own commu-

nity. While small pockets of ultra-Orthodox Jews always opposed Zionism for theological reasons, the current amount of enmity toward Israel from within Jewish communities is unprecedented.

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

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

It goes without saying that it is entirely legitimate to debate whether and when a cease-fire should come into effect. But the most revealing part of the letter was the signatories' explanations as to why they signed it. Over and over again, they mentioned the URJ's complicity in "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," "the oppression of the Palestinian people," and Israeli "apartheid" and "colonialism." They expressed no doubt, no complexity, no qualms. Their righteousness was self-evident to them, as was the moral culpability of those who disagreed. They accused the Reform movement of violating the principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) that we, their rabbis and educators, had taught them in our synagogues, schools, youth groups, and camps.

With ice in their hearts, they expressed no Jewish warmth, nary a

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

We are reaping what we have sowed.

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

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

I am, of course, in favor of vigorous debate. In one way or another, all of us are critics of Israeli governments. But the anti-Zionism of increasing numbers of young American Jews disheartens me. Their ignorance of history is breathtaking, as is their shocking callousness to the dangers of Islamism. The tone and tenor of their earnest pontification is a form of privilege. Where you stand, the saying goes, often depends on where you sit. It is much easier to preach to Israelis how they should deal with terrorists when you do so from the safety of an American university quad rather than from the kib-

butz 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. *

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HOWARD JACOBSON

Advice to a Jewish Freshman

'We are not Israel,' declared the Jewish comedian Sarah Silverman. Well, funnily enough, Sarah, we are'



EAR FRESHER,

It's customary to begin an Induction Address by congratulating you on the hard work that has got you here and expressing the hope that the next however many years will exceed your expectations. I would like to add the wish that you not be distracted from your studies or made to feel unwelcome or uneasy in this place of disinterested learning by depictions of Jewishness, which you, as a Jew, will find hard to recognize, let alone share. To that end, I offer some words of practical advice that I hope will prove useful in answering awkward questions,

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correcting misconceptions, and otherwise setting the record straight. Who knows? It's possible they will even make you feel a bit better about yourself.

As a general rule, do not assume ill will. "All the great evils which men cause to each other . . . originate in ignorance," wrote Moses Maimonides. This is especially the case when it comes to what the world has made, and continues to make, of Jews. Remember, you could be the first Jew some of your contemporaries have ever met. And even when they have spent time in your company, they may prefer to believe what is rumored about you or trust what is written about you in books by authors no less ignorant than themselves.

Q: How should I respond when, in the course of larking about in showers or changing rooms, fellow students ask to feel the residuum of my tail?

A: Smile and be patient. Explain that they are confusing you with the devil, a being in whom, in all other contexts, you would expect them to be too rational to believe.

Further instances of medieval fantasizing you are likely to encounter include the belief that you once murdered non-Jewish children in the streets of Lodz and Lincoln in order to mix their blood with matzoh, and that you now murder them in the streets of Gaza for fun. Be prepared for the modern variant of this ancient superstition, which contends that Jews in the uniform of the Israeli Defense Forces harvest the organs of victims of earthquakes and other natural disasters to whom they pretend to give assistance, the motive in this instance being profit.

Q: How, short of going to the International Court of Justice, flanked by the best lawyers, do I refute this infamous libel?

A: Employ the Shylock Defense. “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” And when we bleed, do we not shrink from the sight of blood?

Explain that you are squeamish as a matter of culture and of faith, that the Jews are a hemophobic people, fastidious to the point of madness even about their own blood, and so are unlikely to dabble willingly in the blood of others. Read to them from Leviticus (“Therefore I said unto the children of Israel, no soul of you shall eat blood”) and then take them through as many of the Jewish dietary laws as you can remember. As for killing just for the fun of it—rest assured that as your fellows spend more time in your company, they will see how little Jews do just for fun.

You could, if you are so minded, remind your fellows that, though the Church of England has subsequently apologized for defaming Jews as child-killers, those making the same charge against the Israeli Defense Forces have not.

Thus, for the antisemite, do all roads lead to Israel. Ready yourself for the Holy Land cropping up frequently in campus conversation, demonstrations, social-science seminars, and even lectures, and take it as read that you will be suspected, should you take issue with anything you hear, of being in the pay of the Israeli state. Accusing Jews of being fifth columnists is, after all, no more controversial than accusing them of being rich. As someone I imagine to be Talmudic by culture and inclination, accustomed to intellectual disputatiousness, loving the arts of discrimination and fine distinction, and knowing that no argument is ever settled, you are going to find it strange that a university of all places should foster the idea that there is only one truth; but take heart from the fact that it isn't everybody who is not allowed to express an alternative view, only you.

Q: Are there then to be only two kinds of Jew? An apologetic Jew, or an enemy Jew? A Jew who says what his adversary says about Israel, or a Jew who lies to protect it?

A: Good question. Be prepared for the answer to shock you.

It might well be that you have never read a great deal about modern Israel, never been there or studied its recent history, and never felt more than a sentimental attachment to the place. “One day, should the world again prove inhospitable to Jews, we might need it” is a precautionary sentiment that a good number of Jews own up to while not really believing it will ever come to that again. So the idea that you are working covertly for the State of Israel simply because you don’t agree with one of your lecturers will strike you first as funny, then as sinister.

Faced with the alternatives of putting up with this obloquy or protesting your innocence, whereupon you can expect to face more obloquy still, I recommend that you follow the example of women’s groups who demand the right to be believed when they complain of being importuned or harassed—it being up to them, and not their persecutors, what constitutes misogyny or abuse. Should a fellow student or lecturer accuse you of crying antisemitism for the sole purpose of silencing criticism of Israel, you must insist on your primary right to be believed.

Q: And say what?

A: Tell them that to accuse Jews of cynically and promiscuously attributing antisemitism for their own gain is itself antisemitic—indeed doubly so. For it at once minimizes the crime of antisemitism and paints you as bearing false

witness on no other evidence than that you are a Jew.

To make this point forcibly does not require that you defend or attack Israel. This is about you — the Jew who lies because that's what Jews do. Be warned: You will find it hard to keep attention focused precisely on that offense. Few can remain subtle in the face of persistent insult and mistrust. Willy-nilly you will be drawn into the politics and find yourself justifying actions that in other circumstances you would view with more circumspection. Or you will be tempted to do the opposite and wash your hands of the whole damned business. It is natural to vacillate between the two. But if there is one position, above all, that I entreat you not to adopt, it is that of a supine, conciliatory Jew who believes he can remain outside the fray. Here is what *not* to say:

Why are you picking on me when your actual argument is with Israel? I am just a Jew standing on the other side of the street. I have no part of this.

This implicitly concedes the case against Israel and, more than that, demeans you.

“We are not Israel,” declared the Jewish comedian Sarah Silverman. Well, funnily enough, Sarah, we are. If you feel you are unfairly taking the flak for Israel, don't forget that Israel unfairly takes the flak for you. Whatever the truth of the charges made against it — that it is a racist, apartheid state, that it practices ethnic cleansing, that its true and only aim is genocide, etc., etc. — Israel would not be judged anything like so immoderately were it not a Jewish state with every past vilification of Jews burnt into its flesh.

View this the other way round and, no, you are not responsible for the actions of an administration you have not voted for and might not support. But the very fact that Jewishness is impugned the moment

fighting between Israelis and Palestinians breaks out—that Jews are attacked around the world, that demonstrators will carry banners or march alongside others carrying banners that deny the Holocaust while wishing it had gone further—proves that Israel is not separable from Jews no matter how much you might want Jews to be separable from Israel. No man is an island, entire of himself, and no Jew can escape from Jewish history untouched. There is a word for what binds and has long bound Jews to Israel, whether any of us care for it or not. I see you looking quizzically at me. Could I possibly mean “Zionism”? Don’t be alarmed. Zionism, yes.

“Zionism.” In our time, few words are more misunderstood or maligned. So successfully has the campaign to discredit Zionism been that even you, a perplexed, inquiring, open-minded Jew, will on occasion feel uncomfortable in its presence. This discrediting has been the work of generations and many hands. Because it enables racism while appearing to root out racism, anti-Zionism has many adherents, some die-hard, some casual. It is an ideology that pretends to liberal modernity, its targets being imperialism, colonialism, exclusivism, and, because of its associations with America, capitalism. Its other target is the very longevity of the Jewish story. All practical applications apart, the word “Zionism” conjures the age-long fear of Jews, their secret conspiracies, their ambitions to undermine and control, the sinister pact they long ago made with the forces of darkness. *Zionism*. The very letters hiss with mouldering and virulent intent.

Q: So what do I say to an anti-Zionist who insists he is not an antisemite and asserts that I am playing the “Jew card” only to silence legitimate criticism?

A: This:

1) My friend—and I will assume you are a friend of Jews

because you go on saying you are, just not a friend of what happens to be a Jewish country — Israel is already the most criticized place in the world. If there are people trying to stop your criticisms, they are signally failing. So synonymous have the words “Israel” and “criticism” become that you rarely hear the former without the latter tagging along. “Criticismofisrael” is now one word. But much depends on what you mean by “criticism.” “Israel is not a very nice place” is criticism. “Israel is the very pit of hell,” is also criticism. You cannot expect whatever you say to go unquestioned simply because you call it criticism. And if I cannot criticize your criticism, it is you who are doing the silencing and I who am the silenced.

2) You have the right, nevertheless, to talk whatever irresponsible nonsense you choose about the country Israel without being labeled an antisemite. Zionism, however, is not a country or a system of government. Zionism is the expression of a people’s soul: It is a longing and a necessity, a Utopian fantasy, an understanding of history, a solution, an act of reasoning, an act of despair, a prayer, a poem, and a song. Hate the poetry of my soul and you hate me.

Take time to talk to tyro anti-Zionists among your fellows and you will be astonished how little many of them know of the Zionist ideal that they confidently pronounce to be murderous and that they will, at a moment’s notice, march and chant against. Taking it to be a species of military adventurism, some think it began in 1948. The ones with a marginally longer historical memory will go back to 1917. In the imaginations of both, the Zionist entity dropped out of a clear blue sky with the single colonialist intention

of seizing Palestinian territory and taking the life of any Palestinian who resisted it. In his last months as leader of the English Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn (of whom you are likely to encounter campus acolytes) went on refusing to employ the widely accepted Working Definition of Antisemitism, from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, because he believed it compromised his freedom to claim that Zionism was an “essentially racist endeavour.” For the right to insist on Israel’s criminality, not just in its present but from the very moment of its creation — and here he, too, was uneducated about origins and dates — he was willing to sink not only his leadership but also his party.

Q: How would you suggest I answer those loyal Corbynites — supposing I fall into amicable conversation with them — when they ask wherein, exactly, lies the wrongness of labeling Zionism “an essentially racist endeavour”?

A: It is unlikely, if you do fall into a discussion with them, that it will be amicable. Though I don’t want to dissuade you from trying to make it so. As for answering their question, throw it right back at them. Ask, “Wherein lies the rightness?”

For there was no *essential* anything about Zionism. It had no essence. It comprised, over a long period (for Zionism has no starting date), a myriad of hopes, dreads, and conflicting expectations. In no sense can it be defined as a single, determined “endeavor.” There was no plan, only a constellation of aspirations, some of them irreconcilable with one another. For Zionists of one sort, it was to be a new start for Jews altogether; for others, it was the culmination of Jewish hopes to return to the home they’d been expelled from centuries before. Not a sudden invasion, indeed not a sudden anything:

Jews had been returning in small numbers and large since the Exile. A Jewish civilization persisted there. It wasn't in order to steal but to continue that Zionism went on renewing itself: to live and work and worship with the freedom and self-respect others enjoyed, alongside an indigenous population with whom the earliest Zionist pioneers hoped to share the land and coexist peacefully. For others again—the poorest and most oppressed—it was a liberation movement, an escape from the massacres of Eastern Europe, from the anti-Jewish sentiment building in Western Europe, from the demeaning status of second-class citizenship that was the best they could expect in Arab countries, and from the confined life of servitude and superstition to which centuries of contempt and cruelty had reduced them. What Corbyn could not bear not to call racism was in fact flight *from* racism.

And now? Well, it is clear that of those disparate Zionist ambitions, several have been realized—Jews are not being killed in Eastern Europe, they are returned to their ancestral homeland, they are no longer reduced to lives of narrow superstition, they are free to follow whatever occupations they choose—whereas other hopes, especially those that envisaged peaceable relations with Arab neighbors, have not. And make no mistake, its failure to deliver peace and equity, however complex the causes, represents no small defeat for Zionism. However we describe Zionism, it can be no surprise that Palestinians see it as a calamity. But here is something you might say to those whose imaginations are not large enough to grasp the all-round magnitude of Zionism's failure to be everything it hoped to be:

Your demonization of Zionism has been a public-relations triumph right enough, but that is all. The sum total of your success

is to have deluded Palestinians with the dream that one day all the country—“from the river to the sea”—will be theirs again, and to have hardened Israelis against any version of that outcome, which would of course be a calamity for them.

Things don't always turn out as intended. Bad outcomes are not necessarily proof of bad intentions. Had you seen the fading of Zionism's idealism as a tragedy for all parties, had you found a more pacific language and sought to reignite some of those ideals that fired the minds and souls of early Zionists, you might have carried all parties with you. As it is, your ancient suspicion of the Jew, your ignorance of history, and the one-sidedness of your sympathies have only helped to keep the conflict simmering.

If all this seems more than enough to be going on while you are endeavoring to concentrate on your studies, there is, I am afraid, one more stratagem those who don't want you to enjoy a quiet life have up their sleeve. This is Holocaust Denial, not the original Alpha or Beta Strains but the more recent Omega Variant.

In its early, primitive forms, Holocaust Denial was mainly a matter of macabre geometry. That many bodies could never have been processed in so few rooms, etc. The spectacle of the deniers scampering over what was left of the camps with their rulers and drafting triangles rendered them ultimately absurd. Their conclusion, that 6 million Jews could not possibly have been gassed in that space and in that time, still makes an appearance on pro-Palestinian marches, but it looks increasingly cranky.

What came next was less actual Holocaust Denial, more Holocaust Relativization. Yes, it happened, but who hasn't it happened to? Your best bet when confronted with this is to concede that Jews are not the only people who have faced extermination; but you could

try adding that few have faced quite so determined and thoroughgoing a version of it, or the ambition to have all trace and memory of them removed from the face of the earth for all time, and this as a consequence and fulfillment of centuries of Christian loathing, to say nothing of a fair amount of dislike from elsewhere. But, but, but, suffering the Holocaust was not a competition, and, if it had been—hand on heart—Jews would be more than content not to have been proclaimed the winners.

Uglier by far, and more sinister by virtue of what it concedes and why, is the new Omega Variant, which allows the horrors of the Holocaust but shakes its head over the failure of Jews to have learnt its lessons. By this reasoning, the Holocaust was a sort of University of Compassion into which Jews were, for their own benefit, enrolled, but where, as witness their subsequent hard-heartedness to the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, they paid scant attention and flunked their exams. The next time you see the Holocaust figured as a University at which, uncharacteristically, Jews were the worst students, inquire politely,

What exactly is it, then, that you would have us do? Retake the course?

Permit me to seize this opportunity to wish you every success in your current studies. *

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ALBERT EISENBERG

Show Up to Synagogue

*It is time for Jews to gather together once again.
And Jews who gather do so in prayer*



THE TORAH'S TALE of Moses's heroism is a rather unlikely one. Saved at birth from certain death at the hands of Pharaoh's executioners, he comes to maturity in the house of Pharaoh himself, raised in worldly privilege as a prince of Egypt only to escape once again to the wilder-

ness after killing an Egyptian slave-master.

It is only when he stumbles upon the preternatural burning bush, which burns yet is not consumed, that God speaks with him, charging him "to lead the Hebrews out of bondage." His immediate reluctance and protest is genuine, not to mention legitimate, for he is "slow of mouth and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10)—variously interpreted as referring to a speech impediment or an inability with words.

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This line of Torah often comes back to me at moments when I feel a bit tongue-tied during the Shabbat prayer service; when I am, amid my fellow congregants, less than fluent in the liturgy and alienated from those with stronger Jewish backgrounds than mine, those who can read Hebrew faster and seem to know every tune without hesitation. I remind myself that God chose Moses in spite of his impediment — or maybe because of it.

Although our Jewish tradition, unlike other monotheistic faiths, shies away from imitating the lives of our prophets, I think there is something to Moses's biography as an unaffiliated Jew-turned-leader that is relevant to the current generation of young American Jews as we face the rising threats of violent antisemitism and the spiritual vapidness of our time.

Our technological era has distanced us from our neighbors and torn the traditional fabric of social bonds. The most recent social schism, the Covid pandemic and our collective response to it, significantly increased both our personal isolation and the divisions we face.

This century, the United States has also seen a steep falloff in religious observance, with church and synagogue attendance declining precipitously and the number of the religiously unaffiliated rising, especially among younger people. For American Jews, the most privileged and fortunate Jewish community in history, this great secularization has been in the works for decades, if not centuries; our grandparents and great-grandparents came here and assimilated, exchanging the Old World's cultural and religious identities for a chance at the American Dream — to succeed and to blend into the multicultural oasis around us.

What their living descendants now face is not just the harsh return of the antisemitism they thought had been left behind, but its coupling with the same troubles experienced by their non-Jewish peers: alienation from neighbors, resultant mental-health issues,

and a profound sense that we've lost our way in a new wilderness.

There is a framework to respond to these twin threats of dangerous Jew-hatred and soul-eroding social-media consumerism, one that has been developed over millennia of wanderings. Like Moses's burning bush, it stands on the path, burning and not consumed, waiting for our curious approach. That framework is Jewish communal prayer, and the vessel that houses it: the synagogue.



While I was blessed with a Jewish upbringing and some understanding of our faith and holidays, I did not regularly attend synagogue until I became an adult.

I felt called back to the idea of Jewish worship—something I had done, but never enjoyed, growing up—in my early twenties. Emerging from a college bubble into work-life in a world that appeared deeply unstructured and increasingly fragmented in the social and political decay of America in the 2010s, I felt adrift. In a daily rise-crash cycle of cellphone notifications, I yearned, as many of us do, to feel “present” in the world, so I found my way to synagogue as a weekly reprieve from the buzzing stimulation of the everyday.

Synagogue offered much of what was missing from an increasingly noisy, petty, and spiteful environment: stillness, depth, knowledge, and a sense of the holy. The people I met there valued these things as well, and our participation in this ancient practice was a quiet, worthy response to the culture around us. Incorporating it into my return made it feel like a weekly homecoming, an escape hatch from the profanity and evil we witness all around us.

This practice allows me, at least temporarily, to put the outside world on mute and immerse myself in a ritual that has been practiced, in one way or another, for an inconceivable 20 centuries (at

least), in every corner of the globe, in the least hospitable political environments. That we repeat the same prayers our ancestors uttered millennia before is, to me, reason enough to compel my curiosity in this burning, yet not consumed, fire. It is a reminder that I, like every Jew, have a role to play in the most extraordinary story humanity has ever known, of an adaptive and unique exiled people, whose journey has been so strange, shocking, and uncertain, it could hardly be an accident that God promised Abraham and Isaac that their descendants would be “as numerous as the stars in the sky” and just as scattered.

There is a pleasant rhythm to the service, an aspect of communal meditation, and an activation of synapses that fire off with synchronized activities—areas of our brain that have atrophied in us, social animals degenerated by device-curated individualism. Just as certainly, areas of the brain *deactivate* as one enters spiritual space: specifically, whichever part of it that has been conceptually retrofitted to contain our phones as appendages that command our minute-by-minute attention. All that falls away as I sit, stand, and chant together with my brethren in shul.

I now attend Shabbat morning services most weekends and have grown more and more familiar with the structure of the service, which at first bewildered me—when to stand and sit, which lines to repeat, when to exclaim “l’chaim!” with the full congregation during the rabbi’s kiddush. And after a decade of striving, I can mostly keep up with the Hebrew chanting.

On the way to becoming more fluent in Jewish prayer, I have discovered the beautiful tribute to the *Eshet Chayil*, the woman of valor, whose worth is more than rubies. I have contemplated the longing couplets of the *Anim Z’mirot* hymn, composed in the 12th century and sung at the end of services: “He adorns Himself for me and I adorn myself for Him; He is close to me when I call.” I have experienced the righteous justice that Joseph, sold into slavery before

rising in Egypt, shows his jealous brothers, his bitterness turned to strength: “Fear not, for am I in the place of God? What you intended for evil, God meant for good.” I have uttered the potent, Zen-like prayer at the conclusion of the silent *Amidah* meditation, so applicable to today’s grievance-driven culture: “Let my soul be silent to those who curse me; and let my soul be as dust to all.”

I have also met and befriended people across political, age, and geographic divides. Our divisions dissolve at the kiddush table after services. The structure of group worship, the sitting and standing and noshing together afterward, is an antidote to alienation.



I have had to trade very little of my secular life to become more engaged and involved in synagogue. I don’t keep kosher. I have a tattoo. I return to my phone on Saturday afternoons and do not cover my head in public. My life would probably appear quite similar on the outside had I not embarked on this journey, but I would feel more scattered and less grounded by an ancient and enduring spiritual identity—one that binds me to my great-grandparents and, I hope, to my great-grandchildren to come.

I don’t always feel “God” because of it. I do feel—in the warm greetings from fellow congregants whose names I can’t quite recall or as I join the other voices to support those saying the mourner’s kaddish, thinking of my grandparents—much more than myself.

There are millions of Jews with backgrounds like mine in our country: people with vague memories of Hebrew School, a rusty concept of the synagogue service, and a lingering sense of something missing. They are disconnected from our birthright, what God promised to our ancestors: “I make this covenant . . . not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day . . . and those *who*

are not with us here this day” (Deuteronomy 29:13–14, emphasis mine). It is impossible to measure how many unique talents exist among this group that could greatly benefit our people—and the world.

What has felt like a vague memory of home is now tugging at us. We must gather as Jews, and Jews who gather do so in prayer.



While antisemitism had lain dormant for many young American Jews, it is a menace that has never left us, and never will as long as there are Jews left to hate.

As individuals and as institutions we have mobilized: organizing marches, calling out antisemites from Congress to campus, and shepherding resources for Israel’s humanitarian and military needs.

But the reflex to act against antisemitism will not matter if American Jewry does not exist in any concrete way to replicate itself.

Because if Jews, and particularly *non-Orthodox* Jews, are not willing to tend to the flame of actual Judaism, to be passed on tangibly to the next generations, our collective outrage about antisemitism will be a footnote at the conclusion of a long and winding story. Hamas and the mullahs and the white nationalists and the raging “from the river to the sea” leftists will have gotten their wish. Modern Jewry will have disappeared into the whirring fog of modern life, the flame kept alight only in Hasidic and other Orthodox enclaves.

Owing to lack of observance and demographic trends—namely, a low birthrate and a high intermarriage rate—non-Orthodox Jewry could face a “significant collapse” in our lifetime, according to Pew data. The community of affiliated, non-Orthodox American Jews may dwindle by the end of this century. Opposing trends, including greater engagement from interfaith families and renewed interest since October 7, may combat these trends. But to reverse them

entirely begins at the individual level — and perhaps today, with you.

We must not be satisfied with rallying against antisemitism, donating to Israel-related causes, and sharing social-media content; we must make plans, too, to return to synagogue and to ensure that our children and theirs receive a Jewish education. Those who are already engaged in religious life must call back our unaffiliated friends and family.

Even those who feel alienated from Jewish observance must hear that call. Even those who are living totally secular lives. Even those who have never been to synagogue in the first place must return, for, as the Torah teaches, each of our souls was born at the creation of the universe.

And our Jewish leaders, our Federations and our nonprofits and our influencers and our rabbis, must be unafraid to call us back to synagogue, remembering that the worst nightmare of the antisemite is a thriving, growing Jewish population.

Like Moses the Prince, so many of today's Jews are worldly, privileged, and exposed to the best of our culture, but are slow of tongue when it comes to our traditions.

To remedy the disconnect, the powerlessness, the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to be, the best thing to do is to be a Jew, joyfully or haltingly, with or without reservations. And being a Jew means practicing Judaism, in a Jewish community. There is no other way to do it.

Come, pray for our world's salvation and better days for our people and all people, as our ancestors have done for millennia, in times of light and more frequently in times of darkness.

Connect, whether it's with God or the scripture or the memory of your late grandmother whose parents fled the Pale of Settlement when she was a child.

Sit, too, with your embarrassment and alienation and awkwardness

at the whole ritual, your nonexistent grasp of the Hebrew, the confusion of when to rise and when to sit back down, when to speak and when to be silent, when seemingly random words are repeated and melodies are abruptly changed. Your discomfort will be the source of spiritual growth, for nothing valuable in this world is easy, and the Jewish journey—singular, painful, enduring—has been anything but.



On a recent summer night in Charleston, South Carolina, I was driving home over one of the city's stunning marshlands when I saw a dense, vibrating cloud that hovered neither near nor far away from me. As my car arched over the bridge, the cloud passed directly in front of a blazing full moon. I was struck by its ethereal, strange quality; it seemed to be placed there for me, and yet I was among a dozen cars that passed by that minute at 50 miles per hour. What if I had pulled over and looked, and listened? Would I, like Moses, have received some Divine revelation? Driving at full speed on a Saturday night, I did not find out.

And what if the burning bush that awaited Moses had been ablaze for years, or had not been the first light in the wilderness? What if there had been many burning bushes, generations of them, passed over by countless shepherds and traveling merchants and water-maids, waiting for the person who would notice?

There are clouds of smoke and fiery pillars and slow, still voices in each of our lives. And there is an eternal light burning right now in every synagogue, for us to seek out if we so choose. *

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ON SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE

Introduction



HERE IS a kabbalistic tradition that Jewish faith and spirituality consist of three elements: God, Torah, and Israel. When these three strands are braided together, we plait the three-cord rope of spirituality. SAPIR invited three rabbis to reflect on the sources of spiritual resilience for themselves, their communities, and the Jewish people, and to offer their thoughts on how to strengthen their resilience in a time of jeopardy.

God. Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, founding rabbi of Kehilat Zion in Jerusalem and co-founder of the Beit Midrash for Israeli Rabbis at the Hartman Institute, offers an interpretation of God's creation informed by personal and Jewish history. Her story has been shortened and translated from Hebrew.

Torah. Lauren Holtzblatt, rabbi of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., looks to a page of Talmud about Rabbi Akiva, who lived and died under the Roman occupation of Judaea, for guidance through the waves of Jewish history.

Israel. Zohar Atkins, founder of Etz Hasadeh Center for Existential Torah Study, places our current moment in the context of Jewish theology, the Jewish condition, and Zionism.

—*The Editors*

These reflections originally appeared in the issue on Resilience (Vol. 13, Spring 2024).

God

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM



ON DECEMBER 21, 1944, my grandfather, Eliezer Cerf, was captured by the Nazis. He and his friends from the Loren Group of the French Resistance had been fighting for several months, after the Nazis had gathered the residents of Oradour-sur-Glane into a church and burned them alive. My grandfather and his fellow partisans were placed before a firing squad. When the senior Nazi commander asked whether anyone would like to say any last words, my grandfather raised his head and said, “Yes. I am a Jew.” To the group’s astonishment, the commander decided not to kill the entire group, thanks to my grandfather’s courage.

What gave my grandfather the strength to face down a firing squad and choose, as his last words of life, a refusal to surrender? What made it possible for my brother, Nadav Elad, of blessed memory, to serve years later as an elite paratrooper in the IDF, knowing he might well fall in defense of his country, as he did? What made it possible for my daughters to sit with us this past Simchat Torah, October 7, “Black Shabbat,” singing Shabbat songs and embracing while the alarms sounded outside our home? What is the source of persistent resolve I see in my community, in the families of the hostages, in bereaved families, in those who have no home to go back to, in those injured in body and soul?

The answer, I believe, can be found in the opening words of the Torah we read on that tragic day.

When God began to create Heaven and Earth—the Earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep

and a wind from God sweeping over the water. (Genesis 1:1-2)

The Psikta Zutarta, a midrashic commentary from the 11th century, interprets this cryptic description of the primordial universe word by word. *Unformed*—a thing that perplexes people. *Void*—a thing that terrifies a person. *Darkness*—the darkness that darkens a person.

Pre-creation was an abyss of dangerous and confusing chaos. As the 16th-century Prague rabbi Yehuda Leib ben Bezalel teaches, the creation of light was a defiant response to that darkness. “And God said: ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.” (Genesis 1:3)

And so from Earth’s very beginning, one of the moral and spiritual imperatives is the resilience of resistance. The world presents a perplexing and terrifying darkness, and it is our role, as it was God’s, not to succumb to it but to continuously light it anew. It is a sacred rebellion against the nihilism of the non-world. The reason the Torah itself begins this way, with light as an antidote to darkness, the life force awakening despite trauma, is to teach us that there are indeed moments in life, and in human history, when we find ourselves at the edge of nothingness, and it is at these moments that we are called not to surrender to the extremism and totality of darkness and chaos but rather to loyally resist by defending and protecting the holiness of life and light. The response to the firing squad is to demonstrate one word of life in the face of death, one glimpse of light in the face of darkness. So does a grandfather pass down the tradition of resistance to his granddaughter. And in the face of terrorist and human destruction, it is the inspiration to save every possible life and rebuild.

The Torah, in its testimony of truth—including stories of evil, hatred, slavery, and indifference—bears witness to the dark human abyss of constant ethical distortion and moral defeat that attempts to intrude upon the light of Earth’s perpetual creation, returning

it to chaotic darkness. But in the Torah's account of the triumph over this evil, it tells us of our forefathers and mothers, all wounded and giant teachers in our holy journal of trauma and recovery, who ignited life humbly and faithfully again and again, with resilience, resistance, and inspiration.

These are dark days of hatred and extremism. Earth as we know it is being unformed and void, with darkness engulfing hope, tolerance, and the sanctity of all life. Yet, from within our broken hearts we can choose every day to pledge our allegiance to God's moral and spiritual imperative, and say: "Let there be light."

One day at a time, one light at a time, one person at a time, humbly and faithfully, with resilience, resistance, and inspiration. May we be worthy to walk in the footsteps of giants, of grandparents and brothers, with our families and communities. May we save every life, spread light to all, and rebuild. May we add our chapter in the Book of Life. *

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Torah

LAUREN HOLTZBLATT



ABBI AKIVA has been my teacher for many years. Famously, the first- and second-century sage did not begin to study Torah until the age of 40, then spent the next 24 years mastering this demanding discipline and becoming one of the most important and memorable rabbis of his time and ours. And when

the Romans banned the study of Torah, he defied them, continuing to teach and learn it at great risk to himself.

His fortitude in clinging to his heritage rather than forfeiting his agency is reflected in one of my favorite stories in the Talmud. Rabban Gamliel, a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva's, recounts having once seen a shipwreck in the distance while traveling on a boat. Knowing that Rabbi Akiva had been onboard, Gamliel began to grieve. But no sooner did Gamliel arrive on dry land than Rabbi Akiva himself approached him, sat down, and immediately engaged him in discussion about a matter of law. Rabban Gamliel, in near-euphoric disbelief, asked Rabbi Akiva who had "raised him" from the water. Akiva responded, apparently nonchalant, "A plank from the boat came to me, and I bent my head before each and every wave that came toward me" (Yevamot 121a).

In the plainest reading of the text, Rabbi Akiva holds on to a wooden plank and rides the waves until he is deposited on dry land. But the word the Talmud uses for "plank" here — *daf* — is instructive. Its more common meaning is "page" — as in, a page of the Talmud. In a deeper, metaphorical reading, Rabbi Akiva is referring to the Talmud, the compendium of Jewish law and lore, as the plank that saves us from the waves of history, even when our ship has been destroyed. It is the page of Talmud, itself containing remnants from the Temple, our ship destroyed, that keeps us afloat in stormy seas.

I have thought about this teaching many times since October 7, holding onto the *daf* as the violence and trauma continue for the hostages that still remain in Gaza, the many displaced from the south and north of Israel, and the innocent Palestinian civilians. I find myself asking, "What are the pages we're meant to hold on to?"

Perhaps it is Makkot 24, the final *daf* of the tractate, which offers more than one instance of Akiva's setting Rabban Gamliel and the other sages of the time straight. Ascending the Temple Mount after

the destruction, they witness a fox exiting the Holy of Holies. The other sages present begin to weep, saying, “Of this place it is written, ‘And the non-priest who approaches shall die’ (Numbers 1:51), and now foxes walk in it.”

Rabbi Akiva’s reaction is the exact opposite: laughter, a eureka kind of laughter. The moment reminds Akiva of a different verse, Micah 3:12, in which Uriah, from the time of the First Temple, offers the prophecy that “Zion shall be plowed as a field” like the kind where foxes trot. But there is another verse in Zechariah, from the time of the Second Temple, which in Akiva’s time had just been destroyed: “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem” (Zechariah 8:4). A verse in Isaiah juxtaposes the two: “And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah” (Isaiah 8:2).

Rabbi Akiva, characteristically holding on to the *daf*, explains:

Until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled. Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid. The Sages said to him: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.

This is Rabbi Akiva’s *daf*, reminding us that Jerusalem will rise again. The *daf* has kept us afloat for millenia, and it will bring us to dry land.

May our written tradition give us strength and may we all be blessed with peace. *

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Israel

ZOHAR ATKINS



I AM LONELY,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once wrote, “because, in my humble, inadequate way, I am a man of faith for whom to be means to believe, and who substituted ‘credo’ for ‘cogito’ in the time-honored Cartesian maxim,” *cogito ergo sum*.

I was reminded of this line recently upon seeing a cover of *The Economist* featuring a solitary, battered Israeli flag beneath the headline “Israel Alone.” Many took umbrage by pointing out that Israel is not, in fact, alone. When Iran launched an attack on Israel last month, it wasn’t just the U.S. and U.K. that rose to its defense. Jordan and Saudi Arabia also came to Israel’s aid, helping shoot down missiles and drones. Unlike when Israel unilaterally destroyed Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, to great condemnation from the Reagan administration (and nearly everyone else except the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*), Israel finds itself far from alone, with a host of friends and allies.

Not alone, but, somehow, still lonely. As Soloveitchik knew and tried to teach us, loneliness is fundamental and perennial to the Jewish experience—and its greatest gift.

The difference between aloneness and loneliness was well defined by Hannah Arendt, who saw aloneness in solitude and loneliness in the crowd:

Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others . . . the lonely man finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed.

Our loneliness began with Joseph. Bullied as a child because of his chosenness, Joseph was nearly murdered by his envious brothers, hurled into a pit, enslaved, imprisoned, abandoned by those he had helped. So, in his adulthood, he learned to pass. An Egyptian in speech, manner, and clothing, when he finally revealed himself to his brothers, it was because he “could no longer control himself before all his attendants.” The loneliness of his identity had become too much to bear. “So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers” (Genesis 45:1). He chose to be alone with them, the very family members with whom he had experienced such early strife.

Israel is the Joseph of the nations.

In the early-20th century, on the eve of the Holocaust, the philosopher Hermann Cohen sought to prove that the Jews are even more Kantian—and thus more German—than the Germans. At the moment he was trying to show that Judaism is perfectly compatible with Enlightenment universalism, German culture was sliding into anti-Enlightenment romanticism. Cohen died before witnessing the consequences of relying on German idealism. But his legacy is alive and well in many pockets of Diaspora—and particularly American—Jewish life, where we hear echoes of this sentiment: “We are the good Jews; we aren’t settler Jews, Haredi Jews, billionaire Jews, tribalist Jews, etc. Let us pass and we will denounce as backward and primitive our embarrassing, extended Jewish family, and the country where half of that global family lives.” The desire to hide, born of trauma, is understandable. But antisemites don’t distinguish between Joseph and Judah. Hamas attacks synagogues, farms, and music festivals. Campus radicals tell Jewish students, “Go back to Poland.”

That loneliness we feel is a function of having been chosen: “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). God was lonely in holiness and created man to partner with him.

The loneliness we carry manifests itself in many forms and mo-

ments. Bringing ethical monotheism to the world, and then being told we worship the wrong God. Being asked to assimilate, and then being accused of having done so nefariously. Contributing much to humanity, and then being called subhuman. Achieving an unprecedentedly low ratio of civilian-to-combatant deaths in an impossible urban war, and at that moment being accused of genocide.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). The loneliness has been, except for some brief historical respites, inescapable. But the reward we gain by going through this crucible is a deeper and stronger sense of self, the realization that our worth as individuals and as Jews does not depend on the judgment of others.

Zionism is the expression of that sense of self-worth. We are called not to be like all the other nations, but to be unique among them.

“I the Lord have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people’s covenant, as a light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6). *

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MIJAL BITTON

That Pain You're Feeling Is Peoplehood

*Our pain must show us that there is no war against
one part of us that isn't a war on all of us*



HAT WORDS of Torah can reflect our profound sorrow in this moment?

Each of us will forever remember the moment when we first heard about the October 7 massacres. I had just arrived at the community I lead, the Downtown Minyan, my mind filled with plans for that night's Simhat Torah celebrations. I am *shomeret* Shabbat, so I was completely surprised when a congregant, frantic with worry, approached me before I had a chance to remove my jacket. He urgently informed me about a devastating attack on Israel. He spoke of Hamas breaching the border, civilian hostages, and reported atrocities.

I was in shock and gripped immediately by a visceral pain for my

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beloved Jewish people. Unable to reach out to my own relatives in Israel to check on their safety, I nevertheless had a service to lead and a community to hold. I still do. Finding words of Torah for this moment—words of mourning, anguish, and resilience—has been my calling ever since that morning.

A teaching by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (known as the Rav) came to my mind that Shabbat, a piece of Torah that I have returned to every day since October 7. It is about Jewish peoplehood. The pain I felt in that moment was for the Jewish people, and I knew many others would be feeling the same, perhaps for the first time so acutely. I've taught this piece many times in the past few years, but as more of an abstract concept, to urge liberal American Jews to understand that Jews are not just a religious group, but a people, a family—and that this comes with special commitments towards one another. The morning of October 7, the Rav's wisdom took on a new dimension.

In a 1956 sermon, Rabbi Soloveitchik asks whether the dispersion of Jews across the world—and the ensuing diversity of Jewish customs, languages, and ways of life—has caused Jews to cease being one people: “Is the Jewish Diaspora one or not?” Are we still a “we”?

To explore this question, the Rav invokes an obscure Talmudic inquiry (Menachot 37a) in which the rabbis debate the status of a man with two heads. Should he wear one or two pairs of tefillin, receive one share of inheritance, or two? The rabbis' question is legal, spiritual and ontological: They want to know whether this is a single or a multiple being.

So too, the Rav asks, we should ask about the Jewish people: Are we one or many? He provides a response as profound as it is raw. He suggests that the way to determine whether the man with two heads is a single entity is to pour boiling water on one of the heads. If the other head screams in pain, then the two-headed man is a single

being; if not, “then they are two individuals enfolded in one body.” This painful test is the test of peoplehood. The Rav writes, “So long as there is shared suffering, in the sense of ‘I am with him in his distress’ (Psalms 91:15), there is unity.”

This past Simchat Torah, such a test was carried out. The worst form of cruel, murderous boiling water drenched our people in southern Israel, and many of us — thousands of miles away — cried out in visceral pain. The anguish has been overwhelming, as has the rage. It has led many Jews around the world to act in ways we have never acted before, inspired by feelings we have not felt before.

This is what Jewish peoplehood feels like. The pain is telling us that the organism is working, that we are still a “we.”

This pain is the essence of being — or becoming — a Jew. Maimonides tells us, poignantly, that we must ask would-be converts to Judaism whether they know that they are joining a despised and oppressed people. “Don’t you know that in the present era, the Jews are afflicted, crushed, subjugated, strained, and suffering comes upon them?” If they answer that they know this, and that they still want to become a Jew, they are accepted. The beating heart of Jewish existence is accepting the pain of peoplehood and the moral obligations that ensue.

This radical empathy is not simply a matter of emotion; it is necessary for the Jewish people’s survival. A week after the massacre, I expressed to a dear friend in Israel, Tanya White, a Torah teacher, how inadequate I felt were my actions to support Israel. Compared with the sharp and constant pain in my heart, the amount I was able to do here felt staggeringly small. I felt as if I was in a shiva house, with my clothes torn. I felt that there was too much distance between the two heads for one of them to realize how much the other was suffering and needed help. But Tanya reminded me of a powerful episode in the Torah that helped me channel my grief.

Exodus 17:8–16 records the story of Amalek’s cruel attack on

the Jewish people wandering in the desert, as well as the Jewish solidarity that the attack inspired. The ragged group of hundreds of thousands of still-traumatized former slaves meets the most base human cruelty as the Amalekites descend upon them, attacking the weakest of the people — children, women, the elderly. The Israelites, with no battle experience, have no choice but to fight. Joshua leads the former slaves, who now pick up arms, and Moses, in his eighties, rises up to a mountain and lifts his hands to give the people strength and courage, to remind them of their heavenly Father. The Torah tells us that whenever Moses’s hands were high, the people overcame, and whenever his hands dropped, the people would lose strength. But the elderly Moses couldn’t hold up his arms alone — he needed help. So Aaron and Hur held up Moses’s arms to keep them upright throughout the entire battle.

Va-yehi yadav emunah ad bo ha-shemesh: Moses’ hands remained steady — steadfast, committed (*emunah*) — until the sun set. That day, these Jews who had just escaped their chains were able to triumph against a malevolent enemy. They did so because they were united, because they were one body. Some took up arms in battle. Moses held up his actual arms, and others held up Moses’s arms. Their pain was shared, but each had a unique role to play.

We are called now to find our own role in this battle.

Even as time distances us from the horrors of October 7, and new horrors rise up in our own backyards, we must *insist* on fighting the “compassion fatigue” that threatens to creep in. We must keep the pain of peoplehood fresh to breed a sense of solidarity with Israel as it fights to defend itself and its borders. Our job is not simply to mourn or worry. Instead, our pain must lead us to act for the sake of our Israeli brothers and sisters suffering under rocket fire and in captivity, grieving the dead and treating the wounded. Our pain must show us that there is no war against one part of us that isn’t a war on all of us. Our

pain must lead us to hold up our arms, supporting Jewish lives and security, and to hold up the arms of anyone undertaking this battle.

And we must prepare for knowing that the job of standing with our people in the United States will become more difficult as Israel ensures it is once again feared in the Middle East. As Micah Goodman explained with tremendous clarity in the early days of the war, “[Israelis] want love and we want fear. We want love from the West. We want fear from the Middle East.” For Goodman, one of Israel’s main challenges is that the actions it must undertake to ensure deterrence in a volatile and tribalistic Middle East will cause it to lose support in the West. Especially in America, we Jews have our role to play: to help support Israel’s battle to eradicate Hamas by shoring up support from its most important ally.

We are living in difficult and dark times. I can’t seem to shake off the sense that we have returned to Jewish history, to saying “*b’chol dor vador*”—from generation to generation—they rise up against us. And I can’t keep from crying out in frustration and horror at this phrase’s taste of truth. We are facing multiple battles in Israel, in America, and around the world. The most important weapon at our disposal, the one we have to nourish and insist upon, is peoplehood—feeling and behaving as one being.

For indeed, Hamas’s war is not a war against Israel or against the “Zionists” denigrated by so many American college students and activists today. It is a war against the Jewish people. It is a war against our history, our memory, our dignity. It is a war against our calendar, the sanctity of Shabbat, the jubilant joy of Simhat Torah. It is a war against innocence; on those who care for our people, who work our fields, who tend our livestock. It is a war against laughing Jewish children and against Jewish parents’ blessings for peace. It is a war against all of us, and we all have our role to play.

This is not the first time such a thing has happened to our people,

of course. Nor is it the first time that war in Israel has engendered new feelings of peoplehood. My late teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, wrote beautifully in *A Letter in the Scroll* about his feelings, and those of many Diaspora Jews, in the days after the Six-Day War:

It was then [in 1967] that I knew that being Jewish was not something private and personal but something collective and historical. It meant being part of an extended family, many of whose members I did not know, but to whom I nonetheless felt connected by bonds of kinship and responsibility.

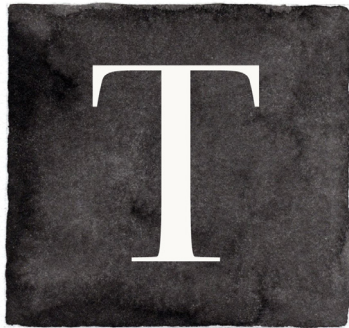
This is our task: to understand that the pain we are feeling is what Jewish peoplehood feels like, and then to hold on to this pain tightly and fiercely, even from afar. Our task is to channel this pain into unwavering and committed action, to either join the battle in our own way or to hold up the hands of those who are fighting. *

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FELICIA HERMAN

They Are Doing Their Part — Are You?

When you encounter anyone you know — or even those you don't know — failing this most basic of moral tests, call them out. Every time. And repeatedly



HERE'S A WAR ON. But Israelis are not the only ones in the fight for morality and civilization.

If you are reading this from Israel, you are in this war in a way that is clear. We wish you strength, courage, and love. When people ask me whether I have family in Israel — implying, why else would I be so upset? — I now say, “Yes — I have 9 million family members there.” We are with you.

If you're reading this from anywhere else in the world, then you need to know: *You are also in this war.* This is a world war, and Israel

This article originally appeared in the special issue on the War in Israel.

is just one of its theaters. It is the battle between good and evil, enlightenment and barbarity.

It's happening "over there," but it's not only happening to "them." Whether you know people in the IDF or not; whether you know people killed in battle or not; whether you know any of the 1,300 Israelis who were massacred — it doesn't matter. If you've ever professed to care about the Jews, if you're on the side of good and you condemn evil, now is the time to show it. There is no "Yes, but." There can be no moral equivocation or equivalence.

Let's just say those words again, words we never could have imagined saying, words we were never supposed to say again: 1,300 Israelis, nearly all of them Jews, have been *slaughtered*. Let this fill you with rage and with sorrow. Let it create a fire in your belly, and a pit in your stomach. Stop appending the words *Zichrono Lvracha* — May their memory be for a blessing — after their names. They are martyrs, killed intentionally because they were Jewish. Instead use *Hashem Yikom Damam*: May God avenge their blood.

When I've said this to friends over the past few days, instinctively I start wagging my finger in their faces. There is *no* sitting on the sidelines. The luxury of fearing that speaking up will mean losing friends, alienating "allies," getting fired, getting expelled, being uncomfortable, hurting people's feelings — all that is *over*.

If this is not the moment that moves you to defend Israel and the Jews, there never will be one. They killed Jewish babies. Entire Jewish families. Pregnant women. Holocaust survivors. *They celebrated their deaths, publicly*. And they're not giving up — every rocket shot into Israel, every terrorist infiltration, is intended to target more civilians, to add to the slaughter.

But here's one advantage on our side: The events of October 7 were so monstrous and depraved that *you don't need to know anything about Israel or the conflict to be able to condemn them*. You don't

need to be Jewish, you don't need to know any history. Your politics don't matter. You don't even need to care about Jews, though it would be great if you did.

You either condemn evil, or you abet it.

Remember the Holocaust? The pogroms? The Inquisition? The massacres of Jews that accompanied the Crusades? Ever wondered how you'd have acted if you were around when those things were happening? This is your opportunity to answer that question.



It's simple to understand what doing your part looks like in Israel. It looks like military service, but also volunteer service. The countless acts of ordinary and extraordinary generosity multiply each day: packing and cooking food for soldiers; babysitting the kids of reservists and taking care of their pets; cleaning out communal bomb shelters; milking the cows of murdered kibbutzniks. Kashering new kitchens in the middle of the night so they can start cooking food for soldiers as soon as possible. Marrying couples on army bases before they go into battle. Being the person in town with the (rare) swimming pool who sets up an hourly schedule so dozens and dozens of kids can come swim each day. And it looks like the bakery in the Arab village across the street from my father-in-law's moshav in the Jezreel Valley, delivering gifts of food to the psychologists, educators, government workers, and defense-division staff who are working in the municipal offices 24/7. All of Israel is under threat, and all of Israel is engaged in the battle.

We must have that same mentality in the United States and beyond.

The reason is simple: How dare we not? How dare we, as Jews or simply as people who say we believe in good and detest evil—how dare we not engage in any way we can? How dare we say it's okay for our friends' children to die in battle, or be beheaded or burned alive,

but, you know, it's kind of uncomfortable for me to say something about Israel in mixed company? And how dare we say that destroying our enemies is against Jewish values? Read the Torah.

Every person I know in Israel has either been called up to serve or has relatives who have been called up. In the Maimonides Fund's Israel office alone, people have been called up to the paratroopers, to combat medical units, to the unit that informs families when their loved ones have been killed. I just watched a video (20 times) of one of my colleagues leading 100 of his fellow Home Front Command soldiers in song from a shelter on their base: *Kol ha'olam kulo, geshertzar me'od, v'ha'ikar lo l'fached klal*: The whole world is a very narrow bridge, but the important thing is to be not afraid. A rabbi I know in Israel has seven sons serving in the IDF right now.

They are all risking everything, and they are all at risk. They are us. We are them.

Each and every one of us is *commanded*, therefore, to do our part, whatever that looks like. Whatever asset you can deploy — not just money but also your voice, your network — deploy. No more shyness, no more apathy, no more embarrassment. No more fear of consequences. No moral confusion, no moral equivalence. No “Yes, but.” Show up for the Jewish people or get out of the way. Speak up for the side of good, or abet the side of evil. Speak up for the side of the slaughtered, or strengthen the hands of those who slaughtered them.

What does that look like? Here are some ideas.

Don't hide your pain: When people ask you how you are, tell them.

Don't hide your Jewishness: Wear it with pride. Not because we are victims, but because we are strong. Because we are resilient. Because our history is littered with death, with massacres just like this, which we remember, constantly, to remind us always to choose life. The Jewish people has a mission, a purpose, and is a light in the world. In every generation they rise up to destroy us. We persevere.

Make sure to thank those writing good statements, doing good things. Thank your elected officials. Thank Biden, thank Blinken. Thank your rabbi, holding everyone's pain and still leading services. Thank the dean or the administrator or teacher who shows kindness to your kid, the non-Jewish friends who send you notes or invite you to dinner. The coworker who finally tells you that she's Jewish, and the non-Jewish one who comes by to express his support. We need all of these good people in the fight.

And when you encounter anyone you know—or even those you don't know—failing this most basic of moral tests, call them out. Every time. And repeatedly.



All the examples that follow below are based on real, recent experiences.

Your 10th-grader's English-literature teacher decides to hold a conversation "on the conflict" on Tuesday? No—call the head of school immediately, and pull your kid out of class if the school allows it to happen. Your alma mater or the organization you support issues a statement lamenting "loss of life" (the passive voice being a dead giveaway for pandering, quivering pusillanimity) or failing to differentiate between deaths caused by murderous barbarians and those from justified military retaliation—deaths that Israel is trying to avoid and Hamas is trying to increase? No—make a call, withdraw your financial support, organize others to do the same. If they respond "But we're a diverse, global community," ask them what part of the institution's values welcomes members of the community who condone beheadings, rape, torture, murder, and kidnapping. Ask them exactly what their statement is meant to show support for, and if the decapitation of Jewish babies is on that list. If their next statement is bad, too, complain again.

And if you don't get the answer you want, quit. Quit your friends, quit your institutions. *Why would you ever want to be affiliated with people or institutions that cannot condemn barbarism?* That condemn mistreatment of everyone but the Jews? That equivocate about acts that are making soldiers, government officials, reporters and cameramen retch or weep onscreen? Quit, and then spread the word. Saying they should be ashamed of themselves is the understatement of the century.

If you are a donor, a philanthropist, a foundation: Hold all the recipients of your funds accountable. If they fail this most basic of moral tests, leave them forever. But make sure they know why.

Lastly, for Jewish communal professionals, for Jewish leaders: This is literally what we've been put on earth to do. Respond to the call to service. Our job is to protect the Jewish people, strengthen the Jewish people, care for the Jewish people, work for a thriving Jewish future. That means unequivocally condemning the slaughter of Jews and defending Israel's duty to defend itself and destroy Hamas.

Most of you know that Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, and that Israel was created to be a refuge from precisely this kind of slaughter—and a place that would fight back and destroy our enemies when it occurred. Many of you have also struggled with how “controversial” Israel is among your constituents, some of whom may even declare themselves to be “anti-Zionist,” not that they likely understand the implications of that term. (This massacre, by the way, is precisely those implications come to life.) You are now called to make a choice. Either coddle people with ideas that lead to Jewish destruction, or oppose them and call them out. Try to explain how you can be both devastated by Jewish slaughter and concerned for Palestinian civilians, but if you have the latter without the former you are a traitor to your people. And do not compromise, even one whit, in how your organization responds to slaughter. If your numbers go down, so be it—why would you want anyone who

cannot meet this most basic standard of morality to be affiliated with your organization?

There is nothing political in what happened last week; there's only barbarism. *Jewish communal professionals must demonstrate unequivocal moral clarity in this moment, or they do not deserve to stay in their jobs.*

This is not “cancellation.” Cancellation is about listening to rumors, finding people guilty with no due process, making mountains out of molehills, inventing offense where none was intended, firing people for using the wrong word. Cancellation is about letting a hypersensitive class of infants who have no ability to discuss differences of opinion make your moral decisions for you.

This is not that. This is holding people accountable for condoning heinous, explicit, intentional acts of Jew-hatred.

If you think this is hard now, just wait—it will get harder. As reports from Gaza begin to dominate the discourse, it will get harder to remind people of how this started, or why it is happening. And who is responsible for the fact that there are noncombatants in a war zone. Israel evacuates its citizens who are in danger; Hamas traps them in their homes. If you do not act now, it will be harder to act later. And you will need to stand your ground then, too.

At the same time, this is very simple. Everything you have ever been taught requires you to stand up for the slaughtered, in whatever way you can.

This is your *Hineni* moment.

As we just read in this week's parsha, *Bereishit*, your brother's blood is crying out to you. Answer the call. *

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