SAPIR

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

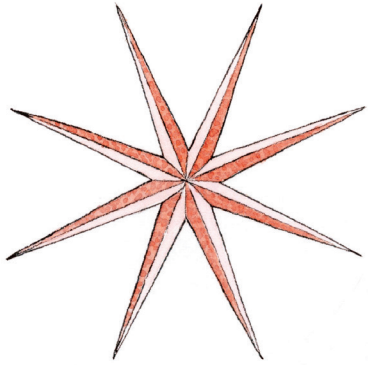
THE ISSUE ON

ACTIVISM

Volume Seventeen *Spring 2025*

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

— Exodus 24: 10



Note on the cover: According to the midrash (Genesis Rabbah 38), Abraham once served as a subversive salesman in his father Terah's idol shop. Expressing his disdain for the idols to his would-be customers, Abraham is said to have destroyed them. When confronted by his father, he spun a fanciful story that cast the largest idol as the culprit. This tale of Abrahamic iconoclast activism is one of the earliest that many children learn, but it is rarely the last. What has been the relationship between Jews and activism since this story was first told?

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CONTENTS

How to Be a Jewish Activist After October 7

Departures

MARK CHARENDOFF

Publisher's Note

The surge in Jewish activism has recalibrated Jewish philanthropy

EVER SINCE Charles Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859, successive generations have found resonance in its famous opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." So it goes for our generation, not least when it comes to activism.

From Sydney to London to New York, the word *activist* has come to be associated, in many of our minds, with antisemitism. Demonstrators at elite universities call for the destruction of one state—the Jewish state. Black Lives Matter chapters openly celebrate the "resistance" that massacred hundreds of young adults at the Nova festival—hundreds of Jews. Hospitals are subject to loud and aggressive street marches—hospitals with strong Jewish ties.

The list goes on, depressingly. But there's an inspiring counter-list, too.

On university campuses where antisemitism has been at its worst, we have seen the emergence of Jewish students who, though they may've wanted only to focus on their studies and enjoy their social life, now find the courage to wave Israeli flags and proudly display their Stars of David. We have seen Jewish alumni reach

out to those students to help them organize and find their voice. They are demanding no more consideration than their non-Jewish peers, but settling for no less. A generation some of us had written off as unengaged and uncommitted turns out to be anything but.

The activism goes beyond the campus gates. We have watched Jewish political activists, particularly in the Democratic Party, make sure their leaders do not cower before the pro-Hamas online mob — and launch primary challenges against those who do. We have used the power of law to bring the fight to the courts to punish bad actors and stop the flow of dollars to institutions that were supporting the enemies of America.

What of philanthropy? We have always been good at rising to a crisis. In recent years, our community dug deep for Ukraine and Covid relief. But those efforts paled compared with the outpouring of support, financial and material, after October 7. We formed collaborations to help Israelis recover and rebuild, organized new efforts to fight media wars, and established partnerships to address the surge of interest in Jewish life in America. We discovered that we could demand that our grantees commit to support for the State of Israel, and we were prepared to part company with those who didn't. We supported courage and stood behind those who showed it.

One of Israel's most effective advocates is Naftali Bennett. Since the earliest days of the war, the former (and perhaps future) prime minister has focused on what he calls the lions and lionesses. Not only did they not flee the fight, as he's noted on many occasions, they ran *into* the fire. As with those Jewish warriors in Israel, so, too, with so many Jewish warriors in America. With another nod to Dickens, I'm convinced we will look back at this activist moment as the beginning of the best of times. ✳

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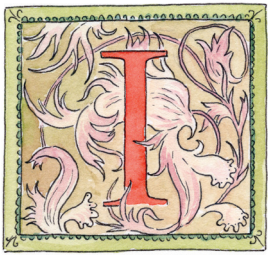
PART ONE

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

AMOTZ ASA-EL

Jews & Activism

A brief history from Abraham to Danny the Red



IT WAS ACTIVISM's finest hour, and Charles de Gaulle's last hurrah.

What began with one shout in February 1968 — a demand to make university dorms coed, hollered by a red-haired student during a politician's speech — triggered a chain reaction that by May had unleashed national mayhem.

The shout at the Sorbonne's Nanterre campus sparked an invasion by male students of the women's dorms. Students occupied the entire campus, paralyzing its work. This led to a second invasion, by police. The fiasco led de Gaulle to shut down the Nanterre campus, provoking a 12-mile protest march to the Sorbonne's main campus in the heart of Paris, which in turn was also closed down, sparking nationwide demonstrations.

The collision was no longer about coed dorms. Now pitting youth against age, and freedom against authority, the unions entered the fray, inciting workers against employers and spawning wildcat strikes that froze the economy while multitudes marched through Paris chanting "Adieu, de Gaulle!"

Thousands were battling police daily. On May 10, 370 people were injured, nearly 500 were arrested, and more than 100 cars were torched. A policeman was killed in Lyons and a demonstrator in Paris was stabbed to death. The rioting was ultimately quelled, but the tumult resulted in de Gaulle's departure the following year.

The rebels lacked a solid, hierarchical leadership, but the drama demanded a figure opposite de Gaulle, and the media found one in the red-headed rebel from Nanterre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, whom it called "the Red," alluding to the color of both his hair and his politics. "The typical student leader today is casually dressed, hoarse and red-eyed.... If in addition, he is a slightly chubby, cherubic young man, with blue eyes and reddish hair, then his name is Daniel Cohn-Bendit," wrote an enamored *New York Times* reporter of Danny the Red. However, there was nothing in that account, or indeed in Cohn-Bendit's future, that resembled previous revolutionary icons' violent careers and deaths.

Unlike Leon Trotsky, who led 5 million troops through a bloody civil war before being assassinated at age 60; and unlike Rosa Luxemburg, who at age 47 was executed with a bullet to the back of her neck, Danny the Red — who this year turns 80 — ended up a marginal European Parliament lawmaker. His colleagues' futures were no more heroic. Most were forgotten, and two who were not — physicist Alain Geismar and philosopher André Glucksmann — became deradicalized. The former became a Socialist politician, and the latter veered rightward, advocating nuclear power and backing the American invasion of Afghanistan.

Even so, Geismar, Glucksmann, and Cohn-Bendit did have one thing in common with Trotsky and Luxemburg: They were Jews.

The French upheaval's disproportionate share of Jewish leaders — Jews made up less than 1 percent of France's population at the time — was hardly unique. In South Africa's Treason Trial of

1956—which indicted key anti-apartheid activists including Nelson Mandela—14 of 23 white defendants were Jews. In Argentina's Dirty War (1974–1983), an estimated one-tenth of the thousands murdered by the junta as suspected anti-regime activists were Jewish. One of the most prominent anti-junta activists, the editor of the daily *La Opinión*, was the openly Jewish Jacobo Timerman. In the United States, three of seven defendants in the Chicago Seven trial, a landmark event in the anti–Vietnam War movement, were Jews. Before that, American Jews were prominent in the civil rights movement. And Jewish scientists, led by physicist Leo Szilard, dominated the petition to Harry Truman by 70 of the atomic bomb's creators not to drop it on Japan. All this is besides the Jewish activists who starred in European revolutions, from Lenin's deputies Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev through to Hungary's first Communist leader, Béla Kun, as well as the spiritual leader of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, György Lukács.

These Jews' political restlessness fired antisemitic imaginations. But it intrigued Jews, too, including the great Israeli historian Jacob Talmon, who wondered in his 1980 book *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution*: "Should any significance be attached to the disproportionate number of men and women of Jewish ancestry among…revolutionary leaders, activists in radical movements…[and] the New-Left?"

Is there, then, anything inherently Jewish about political activism? If so, what is it and what is it not?

Activism is the effort to influence the system from outside it. That surely includes the dissent, agitation, and general spirit of political rebellion with which Hebrew mythology is rife.

Abraham, according to Jewish tradition, was not only the father of all Hebrews but also history's first activist. Appalled by his homeland's idolatrous civilization, he torched a pagan temple before embarking on his fabled journey to the Promised Land. Though not mentioned in the Bible, this tale of political dissent and cultural defiance is what Jewish children have been told since antiquity, as its

Abraham, according to Jewish tradition, was not only the father of all Hebrews but also history's first activist.

mention in the Dead Sea Scrolls attests (Book of Jubilees 12:1–14).

Political defiance, which in Abraham's case is part of received tradition, is explicit in the case of Moses. Moses's clash with a regime that murdered babies and enslaved their parents is what the Book of Exodus is about. The moral of the tale that has been retold every Passover to every Jewish child is as simple as it is harsh: Government is sometimes evil, and when it is, it should be fought.

Moses's activism came in two phases. First, he addressed the present by confronting the tyranny he faced. Second, he addressed the future, writing laws designed to prevent tyranny's emergence in the Promised Land. Israel, he ruled, will appoint a king only if the people so choose, and then, too, that king will be subservient to the law, and "he shall not have many wives…nor shall he amass silver and gold to an excess," or "have many horses" (Deuteronomy 17:14–18).

Moses thus detected the three temptations that to this day destroy political careers — sex, greed, and war. While he was at it, he also told Israel that the government should be checked. That is why Moses never crowned himself king, or his sons or his successor, Joshua. Instead, he created a loose tribal confederation which lasted for some two centuries before Israel decided to appoint a king.

Then there was Samuel, who warned against government abuse and saw political power as incurably selfish, violent, and corrupt. The prospective king, he predicted, "will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers," and "he will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers" (I Samuel 8:11–13). Though he failed to prevent the installation of a monarchy, his legacy

inspired generations of dissenters — the biblical prophets who, for more than four centuries, criticized, rebuked, and confronted Israelite kings and queens.

Some of the prophets scolded political leaders for their personal conduct. Elijah confronted King Ahab for the framing and execution of an innocent citizen in order to possess his vineyard. His struggle for justice stirred hundreds of activists who had to be hidden "fifty in a cave" because Queen Jezebel "was killing off the prophets" (I Kings 18:4). They may have been history's first dissident movement — idealists who fought tyrants who murdered critics, robbed citizens, and staged show trials.

Then there were the social critics. Amos scolded the rich for having "sold the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes" (Amos 2:6). Zephaniah caricatured corrupt judges as "evening wolves" who "leave no bones till the morrow" (Zephaniah 3:3). Micah admonished the aristocrats who "abhor judgment and pervert all equity" (Micah 3:9). And Isaiah rebuked opinion makers "who call evil good and good evil" and "put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20).

And Jeremiah: Determined to dissuade King Zedekiah from leading Judah to a disastrous war with mighty Babylonia, this quintessential dissenter launched history's first anti-war campaign. First he took his case to a select forum — "the elders of the people and the priests" — and then to the public, "in the court of the house of God" where he addressed "all the people" (Jeremiah 19:1–15). The campaign was so audacious that, as would happen to so many other activists, he was flogged, arrested, and dumped in a pit where "there was no water . . . only mud" (Jeremiah 38:6).

Faced with a pro-war party that demanded his execution, "for he disheartens the soldiers and all the people," and realizing his struggle would ultimately fail, Jeremiah lamented his lot: "Everyone jeers at me." Yet he lived to see Jerusalem sacked and his enemies deported from its ruins. No such vindication came for Elijah, whose activism ended with an escape to a cave in the desert. Alone in the wilderness,

the defeated dissident reported that all his colleagues had been "put to the sword," that "I alone am left," and that "they are out to take my life" too. In reply to God's question "Why are you here?" Elijah offered a timeless reply: "I am moved by zeal" (I Kings 19:10–14).

Elijah encapsulated all the innocence, idealism, and frustration that political activism to this day involves — the gist of some seven centuries of Hebrew dissidence. It was a powerful legacy that fed new chapters of political defiance in post-biblical Israel, most notably the revolts against the Seleucid and Roman Empires, both of which were led from below by activists who refused to accept political reality and set out to change it.

Less famously, but even more tellingly, the biblical legacy of political defiance inspired a clash between the most powerful Hasmonean king, Alexander Jannaeus (c. 127–76 B.C.E.), and the supreme court's president, Shimon ben-Shetach, who forced the king to come personally to his court as a witness in a certain case and, like any other witness, testify while standing on his feet.

That tale's historicity is unclear, but it echoes a civil war driven by a social movement whose activists — the Pharisees — wanted a weaker government. The same spirit fed another Jewish activist, Jesus of Nazareth, when he overturned the money changers' tables in the same place where Jeremiah was once arrested for agitating against the king.

Considering this legacy of dissent, one might conclude that political defiance is an inherent Jewish value. It isn't.

The monumental failures of the anti-Roman revolts inspired the political attitude that is the antithesis of activism: fatalism. The Jewish rebels' vow, as cited by the leader of Masada's defenders in Flavius Josephus's *The Jewish War VII* (8:6), "never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself" made way for the Talmud's sweeping ban on Jewish political rebellion as such, "that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the Jews that

Considering this legacy of dissent, one might conclude that political defiance is an inherent Jewish value. It isn't.

they should not rebel against the rule of the nations of the world" (Ketubot 111a).

According to the Talmud, history's management was then handed over to God, who "adjured the nations of the world that they should not subjugate the Jews excessively." An activist's attempt to reshape history now constituted interference in God's work. The Jews would become a docile lot who silently accepted inequities far worse than segregated dorms.

This political passivity plagued some of Jewish history's greatest luminaries. The great exegete Rashi (1040–1105) lived in France while the Crusaders massacred thousands of Franco-German Jews, including some of his students. Even so, he did not respond in any political way. Instead, he filed a complaint to God, asking him in a poem, "How is it…that your wrath has not subsided?"

That is also what Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215–1293) did after he witnessed the public burning of the Talmud at the Place de Grève in Paris, near Notre Dame Cathedral. The smoke billowed only a short walking distance from where Danny the Red would later confront de Gaulle. But Rabbi Meir was no rebel. Other than pouring his heart out in a poem recited in synagogues to this day, he did nothing to affect the reality he decried.

Equally passive was Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), who, though he was Saladin's personal physician, made no political use of his access to government. Despite his close contact with the man who defeated the Crusaders, Maimonides never asked the sultan of Egypt and Syria to sponsor some kind of Jewish restoration in the Jews' ancestral land.

The paradox of Jewish activism emerged most forcefully, and tragically, in the life of Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), a philosopher and exegete who served the Portuguese and Castilian crowns as a treasurer and so was intimately familiar with statecraft. As the leader of Iberian Jewry in 1492, Abravanel led the failed effort to cancel the Alhambra Decree expelling Jews. He then joined the deportees, ultimately landing in Venice with his political instincts intact: He understood that the discovery of the maritime route to India, and its diversion of Europe's spice trade from the Mediterranean to the oceans, was a strategic threat to Venice.

Abravanel wrote a blueprint for a commercial arrangement between Venice and Portugal and handed it to the Venetian government, which adopted the proposal. Abravanel was involved in the talks and therefore a mediator between the world's two leading naval powers as they shaped the future of global commerce, a remarkable fact noted in Benzion Netanyahu's *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher.*

Abravanel, in other words, understood the international system thoroughly and was eager to shape it even while outside the system. In this, he was an activist. However, when it came to his own people's situation, even after experiencing Jewish powerlessness in the most personal and traumatizing way, he was a fatalist.

That is why the theological trilogy in which Abravanel responded to the Spanish Expulsion (begun with *The Wellsprings of Salvation*, 1496) offered nothing like the political plan he devised for Venice. Instead, it offered a discourse on mysticism, numerology, and eschatology arguing that the Spanish Expulsion was part of a divine plan that would culminate in the Jews' final redemption by the year 1531. Political action was not part of this encouraging, but ultimately failed, prediction.

What, then, is activism to the Jews?

It certainly isn't part of Jewish DNA, as Rashi, Maimonides, and

the rest of the Jews who were politically submissive for some 17 centuries attest. Is it, then, Jewish culture? No. Danny the Red, Abbie Hoffman, Jacobo Timerman, Leo Szilard, and the rest of recent history's many Jewish activists usually had limited commitment to Jewish heritage and, in many cases, no acquaintance with its texts.

If not biological or cultural, did Jewish activism reflect a social condition? Considering the traumas of discrimination many Jewish activists absorbed at home, including Danny the Red, whose parents had fled Nazi Germany, it's safe to say yes.

Before the violent trauma of the Holocaust, there was the social trauma of emancipation's failure. The persistence of antisemitism in 19th-century Europe, despite the removal of anti-Jewish laws, is what prompted thousands of frustrated Jews to abandon their medieval ancestors' political passivity and emulate their biblical forebears' activism: some by embracing social radicalism, some by seeking national liberation.

Jewish social radicalism flourished in both Western and Eastern Europe. In the West, its protagonists' impact on history proved limited. In Eastern Europe, Jewish radicalism became a tragedy, often ending in its protagonists' merciless and murderous demise.

This cannot be said of the Jewish activists who turned to national liberation. Zionism, the effort to restore Jewish nationhood in the Jews' ancestral land, was a remarkable, unlikely, and rare feat of political activism, and so was its crowning cultural achievement — the Hebrew renaissance.

The language that is spoken today by more than 10 million people, but which 120 years ago was spoken by almost no one, was revived not by the work of any power's decree from above, but by thousands of activists who labored from below.

What began in the 19th century with poets such as Y.L. Gordon, novelists such as Abraham Mapu, and linguists such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was fanned in the 20th century by activists who opened hundreds of Hebrew kindergartens, elementary schools, and high schools, first in Ottoman Palestine and then abroad. By the 1930s,

Hebraist activists dotted Europe with 498 schools that taught the entire curriculum in Hebrew, 34 in Latvia alone. The revival of the ancient language is as wild an activist achievement as could have been fathomed even by Moses when he said, "Let my people go."

"Let my people go." It is a telling phrase, the spirit of which animates the story Jews tell every Passover in the Haggadah (literally the Hebrew word for *telling*). It is a phrase that launched two great Jewish exoduses, first from Egypt and more recently from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia. First, it was said by Moses on behalf of the enslaved. Later, as Gal Beckerman recorded in *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone*, it was said by "housewives and students"—as a KGB officer put it scornfully—and politicians and community leaders at countless rallies, vigils, sit-ins, and picket lines in multiple cities in six continents on behalf of their imprisoned brethren behind the Iron Curtain, which it ultimately brought down.

The phrase itself encapsulates, and tells us, what activism is to the Jews.

The activism of Moses and ancient Israel is the story Judaism has been telling about itself for the last 120 generations. It is the story Jews tell one another and that parents tell their children, every spring. Jewish activism is not a gene or a meme. It is not an inherited trait, but an inherited language and practice. Like any practice, it exists only by being practiced. That is how ancient Israel's legacy of political activism and the biblical celebration of liberty were revived by modern Jews. It is a revival worth celebrating, the springtime of Jewish history. ✳

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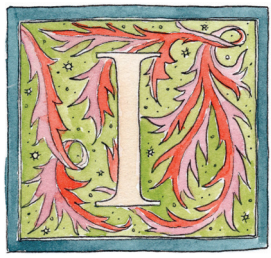
AMIT SEGAL

If Not Now, When?

On the virtues of patience



N MARCH 1978, a group of 40 Israeli high school seniors, on the verge of military enlistment, addressed a letter to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who at the time was locked in difficult peace negotiations with Egyptian President Sadat regarding the price Israel would have to pay for a peace agreement. The students urged him to expedite the negotiations and called for a complete withdrawal from all territories captured from Egypt in the Six-Day War. They warned that if Begin failed, "the blood of the fallen will be on your hands."

Sadat closely followed events in Israel and was aware of the public sentiment that supported his demand for total withdrawal. While his earlier visit to Jerusalem had effectively concluded the state of war between the two nations, the letter, backed by unprecedented media spin and support, granted him great leverage in the negotiations, allowing him to raise the price for the peace he had already agreed to deliver.

Begin had pledged at the start of the Camp David Summit that, if faced with such a demand, he would pack his bags and leave.

Instead, he folded. For the first time in Israel's history, he agreed to demolish thriving Jewish settlements and withdraw from all of Sinai down to the last centimeter.

The complete withdrawal from Sinai set a dangerous precedent in peace negotiations that remains durable to this day: Enemies can go to war against Israel knowing that regardless of the outcome, they will not forfeit even a centimeter of territory. This endpoint of negotiations with Sadat became the starting point for negotiations with the Syrian Assad dynasty, with Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon, and with the Palestine Liberation Organization in Judea and Samaria: a frigid peace in return for a total withdrawal.

The letter led to the emergence of one of the most influential movements in Israel's history: Peace Now. At the same time, a right-wing movement known as Gush Emunim emerged. The two movements shared undeniable similarities: Both were energized by youthful enthusiasm, both were born from esteemed institutions—the leftist one from film schools, the rightist one from Mercaz Harav yeshiva in Jerusalem. One called for withdrawal from all territories, the other advocated settlement wherever possible. Both were poor in resources but rich in media coverage. From their modest offices, one in Tel Aviv and the other in Jerusalem, they both transformed the country.

It is no coincidence that these movements arose soon after the historic election upset of 1977, in which the revisionist Right defeated the socialist Left for the first time. Unwittingly, the two camps exchanged not only Knesset seats, but ideological perspectives as well. The settlers who spearheaded the Right essentially tried to succeed the socialist settlement movement. The early settlements, including the one where I was born, Ofra, exhibited an earthy romantic aesthetic and were very particular about maintaining a uniform appearance for all the houses. In the early years, they had

admission committees, communal dining rooms, a gate that closed at night, and even collective salaries — very much like a kibbutz.

Meanwhile, Peace Now, like the revisionist Jabotinsky intellectuals of old, was a very urban movement, with wire-framed glasses and liberal professions, preferring press releases over dirt, concrete, and cement. Suddenly they had switched sides: The leftists were now the city dwellers with delicate hands, while the rightists donned khaki and sandals and wielded shovels.

The divide in style also reflected a fundamental difference between the two movements: Peace Now called for extensive, immediate action, in one fell swoop. Gush Emunim called for gradual settlement, to seize a hilltop and then a valley, five caravans here and a chicken coop there. It adopted the winning strategy of Israel's historic Labor movement: one more dunam and one more goat, just as Peace Now was adopting the principle of international consensus, previously the preferred method of Israel's historic rightist movement, Herut.

During the crucial years leading up to Israel's independence, Ben-Gurion supported slow, bottom-up grassroots construction, while Jabotinsky advocated top-down international intervention for the establishment of a state. This was the debate between the practical Zionism of settling and planting and the political Zionism of agreements and treaties. Jabotinsky and Begin fought for years over the principle of the Jewish state's final borders, here and now. Even 50 years after the Kingdom of Jordan had been established, Begin still called for "both banks of the Jordan," meaning that Israel should span from the Mediterranean all the way to Iraq.

What began as a conflict between opposing political positions became equally a disagreement over method: the Left stressing the "urgent" and the Right stressing the "gradual."

To put a finer point on it, the more important of the two words that make up the movement's name is not *peace*, but *now*. In the ubiquitous logo designed by an Israel Prize laureate, *peace* is written in a biblical font while *now* is in modern typeface.

> What began as a conflict between opposing political positions became equally a disagreement over method: the Left stressing the 'urgent' and the Right stressing the 'gradual.'

Peace — shalom — is indeed a Hebrew word that appears in the Bible 237 times. And although the word *now — akhshav —* does not appear in the Bible, it is more than 2,000 years old. So is the tension within Judaism between the urgent and the gradual. The famous words of Hillel from Pirkei Avot serve as the rabbinic basis of the Left's position: "If not now, when?" (Pirkei Avot 1:14).

This *nowism* claims to be a continuation of practical Zionism, whose message was — in contrast to that of most European religious Jewry — to take decisive action against all odds, instead of passively waiting and praying.

The success of Peace Now gave rise in subsequent decades to a series of Tel Aviv–based movements that, though they appeared quite different from one another, shared an absolutist commonality: They called for immediate action and demanded total results.

In the 1990s, left-wing organizations came out with the demand: "Let's get out of the territories *now*."

In 2006, immediately after the Second Lebanon War, Peace Now alumni launched an extensive campaign titled "Assad is waiting for Olmert," a clear call for Israel's prime minister to immediately accede to the Syrian dictator's demands and withdraw from the Golan Heights all the way down to Lake Kinneret.

At the same time, a public movement arose for the return of

The leaders of the leftist movements would do well to take Rabbi Tarfon as good counsel that, alongside the requirement to act now, not everything *can* happen now.

abducted soldier Gilad Shalit from Gaza, calling, "We want him home, we want him *now*."

The intentions behind all of these movements and calls to urgency have always been good; the results have always been devastating. Taking them in chronological order: The Oslo Accords, intended to pave the way for a Palestinian state, blew up after Israel's prime minister offered almost everything to the Palestinian Authority leader. Instead of negotiating in good faith, Yasser Arafat launched an intifada in which more than a thousand Israelis were murdered.

With Syria, Israel narrowly escaped losing the Golan Heights only because of the recalcitrance of Hafez al-Assad, the butcher from Damascus. Otherwise, ISIS and global jihadists would have been wading in the Kinneret, poised to conquer the Western Galilee.

The decades-long campaign to leave the territories immediately and unilaterally culminated in Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Rather than save lives as intended, it ultimately extracted a horrifically bloody price. In addition to emboldening Israel's enemies and leading to war the following year, the withdrawal allowed Hamas to quickly seize control of Gaza and establish the largest terror stronghold ever seen, with hundreds of kilometers of tunnels, tens of thousands of fighters, and hundreds of millions of shekels. On October 7, 2023, two commando divisions breached Israel's borders, resulting in the

worst massacre in the country's history and the greatest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust.

Gilad Shalit's eventual return by Netanyahu's government five years later came at an unprecedented cost of more than a thousand terrorists, including despicable murderers such as Yahya Sinwar—the man who would later orchestrate the October 7 massacre.

The most recent example of this absolutist nowism folly is, it pains me greatly to say, what Israel and its supporters are struggling through today. The legitimate and wrenching campaign to save the hostages is expressed variously in the phrases "Bring them home *now*," "All of them *now*," and the twin demand of "at any cost."

The emotive and political intensity of this campaign has already, in keeping with the pattern, inflated the price for Israel and undermined its negotiating position. For the first time, Israel paid for the release of hostages not only with other prisoners but with strategic military currency, a cease-fire.

None of this is to cast doubt on the moral and deeply Jewish impulse toward urgent action. But it is important to remember that Judaism tempers this impulse with realism. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon, also in Pirkei Avot, "It is not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it" (Pirkei Avot 2:16).

This is the Jewish canon's way of teaching the tension between the "now" and the "next." The leaders of the leftist movements would do well to take Rabbi Tarfon as good counsel that, alongside the requirement to act now, not everything *can* happen now. It is Judaism's way of demanding action cognizant of the illusion of control.

This combined approach was well-known to the fathers of Zionism but has been forgotten by leaders of movements that tried to succeed them.

Theodor Herzl raced around the old world with urgency, trying to secure a state for Jews, knowing almost for sure that he would not live to see it. At the conclusion of the First Zionist Congress in Basel on September 3, 1897, he wrote:

> Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in a word — which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly — it would be this: At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in 50 years, everyone will perceive it.

Exactly 50 years later, the UN General Assembly decided on the establishment of the State of Israel. Herzl died seven years after he wrote these words and did not live to see the state he had envisioned.

The partition plan approved by the United Nations presented David Ben-Gurion, leader of pre-state Israel, with a similar dilemma. With trembling hands he signed the agreement that established impossible borders for the Jewish state, just a few kilometers wide, with Jerusalem under international sovereignty and the majority of the biblical Land of Israel in Arab hands. The word *Jerusalem* appears nowhere in Israel's Declaration of Independence of 1948.

His rival Begin went wild:

> There is a limit to security that can be achieved without Jerusalem. There is a limit to peace that can be achieved without Jerusalem. No nation in the world would relinquish the heart of its capital.

For years Begin accused Ben-Gurion in the Knesset — just one kilometer from the border — of knowingly relinquishing the capital.

Had Begin not been persona non grata in Ben-Gurion's prime ministerial office, he would have seen on the desk of Israel's first prime minister framed words from Exodus 23:30: "Little by little I will drive them out before you," a knowing nod at Ben-Gurion's

future plans. In terms of results, it is clear now that he was right: Today's Israel spans nearly twice as much territory as was designated for it, and united Jerusalem is its undivided capital. Like Herzl, Ben-Gurion knew that there is a balance to strike between what can be done now and what can be done by others in other times.

Neither Herzl nor Ben-Gurion — and certainly not leaders of the various "now" movements of recent decades — was familiar with the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. The rabbi with the luminous eyes founded the yeshiva from which would later emerge Gush Emunim — the nemesis of Peace Now. He articulated in a single sentence both Herzl's and Ben-Gurion's urgent activism along with their long-term vision: "The eternal people does not fear a long road." ✳

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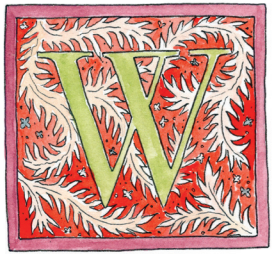
CHRISTINA H. PAXSON

A University's Responsibility

Brown's president on how to educate thoughtful activists



E LIVE in a country that has long honored activists. The men who fought for a vision of America free of British rule. The women who risked arrest to earn the right to vote. The students who sat at lunch counters and joined others in marching for the struggle for racial equality.

Nearly four centuries ago, it was an activist who established the city that the university I lead calls home. In 1635, Roger Williams fled from Salem, Massachusetts, where he had been convicted of sedition and heresy, and landed his canoe in what is now Providence. Williams held the then-outrageous view that people of all religious beliefs — including "Jews, Papists and Turks," in addition to the wide variety of Protestants — should be free to practice their religions as they chose. Rhode Island was founded on that principle. So was Brown University.

Today, in the challenging moment that college and university presidents find themselves navigating, a Roger Williams quote from 1652 is particularly salient. He asked that "the beauty of civility and humanity be maintained among the chief opposers and dissenters." Williams understood and valued the role of dissenters in society — after all, he was one himself. And yet he also believed that dissenters should not dehumanize those with whom they disagree.

We might understand the same about Alexander Hamilton, Susan B. Anthony, and the black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College who led the sit-ins for civil rights. All of them exemplified this notion of civility and humanity in the practice of opposition and dissent — that is, of activism. History rightly regards them as heroes.

Today, the word *activism* has, for many, a far less positive resonance. Since the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, activism conjures images of masked, angry, and sometimes destructive student protesters. Across the country, there were moments when protests undeniably crossed the line into harmful dehumanization of groups of students on college campuses. And as video clips of campus protests went viral, public opinion of student activism sank, accompanied by intense legislative scrutiny of how protests were managed. This was immediately followed by questions about whether colleges and universities were living up to their responsibilities to hold students accountable.

Yet the recent challenges over student protests do not mean we should aim to quash campus activism. Rather, we should approach it through the lens of education — which is, after all, the mission of colleges and universities — and teach students what effective, constructive activism looks like. Under the right circumstances, student activism can be a vital part of learning how to become a leader who changes society for the better.

My own education about activism started early. I was raised in a Quaker household during the Vietnam War, when Sunday school lessons focused on civil disobedience, pacifism, and conscientious objection to the draft. I valued the fact that this was not taught as dogma. Instead, we students were free to develop our own views about the tenets of Quakerism and were respected even if we disagreed. And I did: I couldn't square pacifism with what I saw as the clear imperative to take up arms against Hitler. After I converted to Judaism, I learned about the important role of Jewish activism in key moments in history. I will forever be proud of my father-in-law, who as a young man had been a hair-on-fire Labor Zionist who was briefly interned in Cyprus for running guns and Holocaust survivors through the British blockade of Israel — a decidedly un-Quaker-like thing to do.

Young people have been, and always will be, energetic and idealistic. They will see flaws in the world that they want to repair, even as they are still developing the capacity to think strategically about how to accomplish their goals, or even assess whether their goals are laudable. We often observe that much of the activism that happens on campus is misguided, uninformed, or underinformed, and wholly ineffective. Some of it is outright offensive.

The question, then, is how can college and university leaders guide student activists down productive paths that enhance their educations? What guardrails should we put in place for students who embrace activism to ensure it becomes part of the process of learning, to help them eventually mature into informed and effectively engaged citizens? What is our obligation as educators to shape the future of student activism?

After the October 7 attacks, Brown, like many of our peer institutions, did not have experience managing a flavor of activism that most of us had neither encountered nor even imagined: activism that set groups of students against each other. To my knowledge, never before had universities and colleges needed to

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address situations in which protests by one group could create hostile environments for other groups.

The experiences of the past 18 months have distilled my views on how college and university leaders should respond to campus activism into three fundamental principles:

Colleges and universities need to provide opportunities for students to learn about the full range of ways to effect change.

Activism is about making a transformative impact, and students often have not learned yet that effective activism takes many forms. The standard tool kit of protests — marches, walk-outs, and (increasingly) digital campaigns — have the advantage of being readily accessible and easy to implement. Although they occasionally achieve desired results, most often they don't. We must help students understand that other approaches are often more effective: voting, volunteering, political organizing, running for office, filing lawsuits, pushing for legislation, and working in organizations that advance specific agendas.

America's history demonstrates that effective activists succeeded by embracing a broader set of strategies. The signers of the Constitution, the suffragists, and the students who led the sit-ins at lunch counters engaged in political organizing, get-out-the-vote campaigns, and other movements. Universities must broaden the thinking of student activists — through courses, internships, or guest speakers — about the range of strategies and approaches for making a difference on issues that matter to them.

The tools they need to succeed — strategy development, negotiation, fundraising, marketing and communications, leadership skills, and the ability to study and understand multiple sides of an issue — are valuable skills to teach, regardless of how students will apply them in their future lives.

I often think of an alumnus of my university who told me that, at the beginning of his time at college, he marched around our main administration building carrying signs in support of global causes. At some point, he realized that what he was doing was merely performative and that there were better approaches to making change. He went on to a distinguished career as a nonprofit leader, eventually (and ironically) leading an organization that he had protested as a student. He insists today that the early attempts to make change were an important part of his learning experience.

Students need an environment that cultivates this learning. This brings me to the second basic principle for a university leadership response to campus activism:

Strive for a culture that prizes both freedom of expression and respectful discourse.

The role of a university is to advance knowledge and understanding. This mission can be fulfilled only if students and scholars are free to study and learn what they choose, without fear of censorship, and to advance, contest, and debate — often vigorously — opposing points of view.

This can result at times in a tumultuous academic environment, but discovery is often messy, and the path to learning about complicated issues is never easy. The last thing we want are faculty and students who are not committed to pushing the boundaries of knowledge and ideas. If everyone complacently accepted the status quo, science would stagnate, ideas about what makes for peaceful and prosperous societies would not advance, and the practice of art would be frozen in time. On campuses, we have to be prepared to be challenged and to hear things we do not agree with. This is the price of embracing free expression as a core value.

At the same time, activism that attempts to shut down opposing points of view, or that results in harassment or hostility, has no place on a campus. Colleges and universities have to be places where all members of their communities bear the same responsibilities to honor free expression as a foundational principle. Debasing or dehumanizing others who have different views stifles learning and debate. It deprives others of their right to be full participants in the life of the institution and is the antithesis of what should happen at any college or university.

It's important to note that, despite images and headlines that focus on some of the most egregious acts of violent protest across the country, most student activism does not violate the law or university policies. Nor does it harm other students. Over my 13 years as a university president, I have seen activism emerge on a wide range of issues: free speech, financial aid, climate change, homelessness, racism, access to education, university governance, and a host of other social and political issues. The vast majority of student activists understand that they need to use persuasion and reason, rather than hostility or intimidation, to make change. Although the work of these incredible students rarely makes the headlines, it's important to recognize that they are making a difference in so many ways, and we can be proud of them.

Yet we undoubtedly continue to witness approaches to activism

and protest sharply at odds with community standards. This leads to my third and final critical point:

Colleges and universities must make sure the rules that govern activism are crystal clear. And campus leaders need to enforce them.

Teaching students about guardrails around activism is part of our job as educators. University officials need to prioritize meeting with students *before* protests begin so that we make sure students understand their rights, responsibilities, and the consequences of different types of actions. It means teaching the "why" of rules — that they do not exist to subdue or quash activists, but instead to protect the rights of all members of the community to participate fully in the life of the campus.

No college or university should tolerate or accept protest that dehumanizes or harasses any member of the community, or deprives others of their ability to work, study, or learn. Students need to hear this message loud and clear. Sometimes students decide, quite purposefully, to step across the lines of allowable behavior. This may include prolonged sit-ins or trespassing by refusing to leave a building or location. When these acts violate policies or the law, students must be fully informed of the implications of their actions and be prepared to bear the disciplinary and legal consequences.

This is a core pillar of the educational case supporting the role of student activism. Just as it is important to teach students about the range of ways to effect change through their activism — and just as this activism is enabled by ensuring a learning environment that cultivates the free exchange of ideas — we must also confront behaviors that threaten the fulfillment of these core principles.

With appropriate standards in place, activism can play an important

role in developing students into the leaders and changemakers we want our graduates to be. We can remind and re-remind students and readers alike of that wonderful plea from Roger Williams, that "civility and humanity be maintained among the chief opposers and dissenters."

We cannot expect 18-year-olds who want to change the world to enter college fully equipped to do so. Their first attempts may be misguided. Instead of telling them they are wrong for trying — that they should be complacent — we should teach them what it takes to inspire and lead change. ✳

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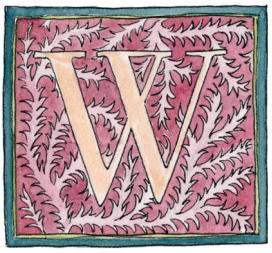
EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Museums & Their Discontents

Why have cultural institutions become political flash points?



WHILE PROTESTS at university campuses since October 7, 2023, have earned appropriate notoriety for their violence, tactics, and support for Hamas, similar demonstrations have been on view at America's museums. In February last year, an open letter was signed by hundreds of "museum and culture workers" in New York City, "to protest the disgraceful silence of our institutions as Israel commits genocide in Gaza with the military and financial support of the United States," and to demand a cultural and intellectual boycott of that state. As winter warmed to spring, these workers gathered for more frequent in-person protests at their places of employment, sometimes to great activist acclaim. A May protest at the Brooklyn Museum was described by *ARTnews* as "one of the most fervent Gaza solidarity actions yet to descend

on a New York City art institution," calling for the museum to condemn Israel's attacks in Gaza and divest from corporations connected to Israel. The fervor even extended to the private home of the museum's director, Anne Pasternak, which was defaced with graffiti and draped with a banner calling her a "White-supremacist Zionist."

Such incidents, which have proliferated in museums, also have a distinctive character that reveals much about the contested status of museums and the nature of contemporary activism. Consider a single, low-key example. In August 2024, at a lovely museum in Queens, New York, devoted to the sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, a staff member was told he would not be permitted to wear a keffiyeh in the museum. It was explained that the keffiyeh — a scarf that has become associated with what was once called the "Palestinian cause" — was considered by the museum to be "political dress" that would offend some visitors and was thus deemed inappropriate for staff members to wear. Within days, a petition from some 50 staff members objected to the ban, walkouts were staged, and after the museum terminated three employees for noncompliance (and another for related reasons), international headlines were the result. A few months later, another protest there led to the posting of sarcastic museum labels: a seat was named "Bench of Banishment," the fire alarm, "Alarm of Annihilation." One wall label, according to a report in *Hyperallergic*, read, "This wall is a boundary the museum uses to erase culture, banning keffiyeh and firing staff who challenge its racist views."

Several aspects of the Noguchi brouhaha are worthy of notice. First, in public declarations and protests, the keffiyeh was defended by its advocates as a cultural icon. The museum was accused of attempting to quash Palestinian culture. One of the fired workers said to *Hyperallergic*, "I am showing my support for Palestinians because I don't really see this as a political thing. I was raised Christian and I believe in peace." According

to the article, "most workers at the Noguchi Museum feel that the prohibition amounts to the deliberate erasure of a people's material culture." Natalie Cappellini, one of the gallery attendants dismissed for the sartorial infraction, was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that the keffiyeh is "a cultural garment and we are wearing it for cultural reasons."

In other words, this was a matter of personal liberty and free speech, an honorable liberal exercise that the tyrannical institution was consigning to the Bench of Banishment. But when interviewed for the *World Socialist Web Site*, one of the dismissed gallery attendants, referred to in the interview as "Q," offered a far more direct explanation: "When I wear a keffiyeh I am trying to draw attention to horrifying genocide in Palestine that is being conducted with our tax dollars." Another dismissed employee discussed how his wearing the keffiyeh followed his "learning a little bit more about the colonial state of Israel and how it functions, the apartheid conditions, things like that." He adds, "Four people have lost their jobs over a scarf. Meanwhile, there's a genocide happening. The absurdity of this ban is rivaled only by the horror of the bloodthirsty actions of Israel in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon."

So, when Cappellini told the *Times* that the "politicization of the keffiyeh" is something being "imposed" by the museum leadership, she was inverting the truth. The employees knowingly wore the scarves as political statements. And they are not the first to have done so. The keffiyeh — a garment traditionally worn by Bedouin and rural Arabs — came into widespread symbolic use when adapted by Yasser Arafat, by the hijacker Leila Khaled of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and by other leading figures in multiple intifadas, globalized and otherwise. Its ubiquity at protests against Israel and in organic food co-ops for the past several decades has been due entirely to what it symbolizes politically in the context of the conflict. And now it is being used to suggest that any dismissal of the protests is not

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because of objections to Palestinian terror or Islamist ideology or the tactics of demonstrators, but simply a matter of ordinary cultural prejudice, just as the phrase "from the river to the sea" is now treated as if it were some pastoral invocation rather than a call to destroy a sovereign state. We might call this defense a form of "keffiyeh-washing."

Another rhetorical gesture used by the Noguchi protesters and by those reporting on it was to invoke the sculptor himself, who they confidently say "would condemn the current Gaza genocide." What his stance would be on the matter, "there is little doubt." Too true, there is no need to speculate where Noguchi stood on the "cultural and intellectual boycott" of Israel: He designed the stunning Billy Rose Sculpture Garden at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

But there is an even more revealing workers' statement in the Noguchi debacle. As one worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "This is something that me and my coworkers, and also fellow concerned community members, have been really trying to project: that the museums are political spaces." It turns out that

the deliberate confusion created here between the cultural and the political is concerted and typical of many other examples of museum activism. The activist ambition — the attempt to transform social structures through the application of pressure — is to treat culture entirely as a manifestation of the political: Culture must be completely answerable to the absolute and far more expansive demands of politics.

Museums and cultural centers are not just the setting, the battleground, as it were, for these cultural-cum-political fights; they are seen as part of the oppressive apparatus the protesters are attacking. The museum is part of the Western colonial project, not merely the place of battle but the object as well, a target of such high value that it can be likened to an enemy's military arsenal.

At the Brooklyn Museum demonstration, and at many others, a common chant and poster copy is "NYPD KKK IDF: They're All the Same." The cause of Palestine is metonymic, standing for a grander whole that embraces every progressive cause. Gaza never stands in isolation.

Where did this kind of museo-activism come from? To a certain extent, from within the art world itself. The activist ambition may even have its origins in some of the ideas that have flourished in Western culture over the past two centuries: Art should challenge the status quo and spur change. It should apply pressure. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the target of cultural opposition was the bourgeoisie and the notion of a respectable "middle class," which the artist would help overturn. That impulse gave birth to what was once called the "avant-garde" — a term that has military associations, as if the artist were part of the forward guard in a battle for social and institutional transformation.

Contemporary museum activism has a different and much

larger enemy. After decades of influence from postmodernism, postcolonial studies, and multiculturalism, the target, either explicitly or implicitly, has become the West itself—its prestige, its influence, its organizing principles, its heritage, and its achievements. The activist artist will aim to undo the West's purported evils, which are assumed to be, by definition, greater than those of any other culture, past or present. And so we get a culture that is restless, contentious, ironic, humorless, recklessly iconoclastic, and possessing great self-love for its supposed risk-taking and idealism. Being an activist has become the artist's and intellectual's self-celebratory vocation.

What does this mean for museums? They are in the crosshairs. Activist polemics, in taking the West as their nemesis, must also grapple with the museum, an institution that has, for centuries, codified and collected and represented that culture and is largely its creation. In its origins, the museum's purpose was not to challenge a culture or supplant it, but to preserve and enhance it, passing on its most cherished ideas and ideals and creations. The great museums of Europe were built as secular temples, presenting core beliefs and achievements. Such museums were celebrations not just of their national cultures but of their national cultures' reach: They traced the paths of imperial power, giving a home to artifacts that had been wrested or discovered on sea voyages or missions of conquest.

This enterprise is now widely condemned, and there were indeed examples of real malfeasance that have been widely discussed. But the "Imperial museum" also showed how much there was to understand. How did vastly different human beings, so alien in custom and appearance, see the world? The museum enterprise led to an expanded idea of human possibility and to a quest for universal principles. It transformed the world and transformed the West's understanding of the world.

The Imperial museum evolved into what might be called the Enlightenment museum. But beginning a half century ago, the

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activist charge against the Western ideas that led to the very creation of museums began to be aimed at museums themselves. In this new dispensation, the museum is not to be the curator of Western culture, but its critic or even its opponent. By the 1980s, there were explicit calls for new forms of museums. The Enlightenment museum was elitist. The new museum would be populist. The Enlightenment museum was governed from the top down; the new museum would be overseen from the bottom up. Museums given shape by their collections would give way to museums shaped by audience and visitors. They would become, in part, community centers and would reject the models of previous centuries. The new museum would also counter the Enlightenment's attempts at universality by focusing on the West's past injustices and celebrating its less privileged groups, now freed to recount their own histories of suffering and opposition.

Thus was born the "Identity museum," an institution devoted not to the universal but to the particular, and not to a civilization but to an identity. The Identity museum has become the characteristic museum of our era. Over the past 25 years, museums have opened devoted to black Americans, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Latino Americans, American Indians, and Chinese Americans. The very idea of an Identity museum is to avoid impartiality and narrative distance. Despite their intention of radical specificity, each focusing on a different identity, most

if not all Identity museums tend to project an identical narrative map shaped by identity politics. Each group is shown undergoing trials due to racism and discrimination until it learns to find its voice and demand its rights. Every Identity museum insists on its distinctiveness, but the overall activist narrative is rigorously uniform. (Only Jewish-American museums, as far as I can tell, fail to follow this formula, partly because the history of American Jews does not typically fit the identity-based political paradigm.)

Nearly every Identity museum I have seen also incorporates some kind of call to action, to extend the political movement that led to liberation. In this way, the Identity museum has been a harbinger of what was to become even more explicit in recent years as museums have increasingly become activist institutions.

The American Alliance of Museums, a trade organization, has published multiple essays supporting the trend toward Activist museums. One, from 2016, begins by attacking the idea of "neutrality" in museums and argues that a museum focused on American penitentiaries should adopt an activist stand to change "criminal justice policies." The School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester in England has been giving out Activist Museum Awards since 2019. That year also saw the publication of an anthology entitled *Museum Activism*, edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell. The collection gives a sense of the scale of this worldwide movement, with almost unanimous agreement on the principles that should govern new museums and reconfigure old ones.

"Only a decade ago," the book begins, "the notion that museums, galleries and heritage organizations might engage in activist practice — marshalling and directing their unique resources with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises — was met with widespread skepticism and often

derision." No more. "Museums, as social institutions, have the opportunity and the obligation to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed. Activism also means resistance — the critical questioning and re-imagining of the status quo." One essay in the anthology, "Growing an Activist Museum Professional," said it was time to set aside the "long-cherished cornerstones of museum practice — impartiality and objectivity." And by impartiality and objectivity, the critics mean the Western Enlightenment and its heritage.

These arguments have been transforming even the most traditional museums, many of which have also become self-consciously activist.

- In 2013, for example, the National Archives unveiled a major exhibition to prepare its million annual visitors to see original copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with the Bill of Rights. The exhibition showed not how the ideas in these foundational documents succeeded despite social flaws, but how extensively, throughout our history, they have been dishonored, again and again. Important qualifications are diminished by narrow focus and the complete absence of historical context.
- An exhibition about American art and the natural environment that appeared at Princeton University and other museums attacked the Western view of nature as well as the West's purported systemic racism.
- A major exhibition supposedly celebrating the settling of the American West at the Arch in St. Louis is peppered with condescending disdain for the entire idea.
- Even symbolism is put in service: At the nation's first museum devoted to the American Revolution, which opened in Philadelphia in 2017, a display about 18th-century American laborers seeking greater equality showed a shoemaker's hammer and a farmer's sickle arranged in the shape of the symbol of the Soviet Communist Party.

> It is now almost impossible to go to a museum to get a clear understanding of, say, Newton's laws of motion. Instead, we are urged to act or think in a certain way. Ecological causes rank high.

This progressive and progressing partiality has disrupted the permanent exhibitions of major museums as well. The Brooklyn Museum's main exhibition is now displayed with a series of apologies for overrepresenting the "taste of these white, urban, mostly male donors." One panel at the museum declares a "priority" of the museum: to "explore the dynamics of race, gender, class, and colonialism." The existence of the museum itself is apologized for, as is now ritualistic in museological circles, with "land acknowledgements" that note that the building is located on territory that belonged, from time immemorial, to various American Indian tribes. No insight is provided of what this building and its contents did to illuminate the world, or to display artifacts that would have never been otherwise preserved. And no celebration is offered of the large-scale Western civilization the museum was actually built to preserve and offer up for contemplation.

The transformation has affected science museums as well. A permanent exhibition of fossils at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History devotes extensive attention to contemporary climate change as interactive displays urge young people to "make a difference," even offering a suggestion that they create "music about environmental justice." It is now almost impossible to

But there is reason for some hope. While demonstrations at universities have shown that there are few administrators willing to confront the intellectual carnage on display, at most museums and many cultural institutions, action was taken.

go to a museum to get a clear understanding of, say, Newton's laws of motion. Instead, we are urged to act or think in a certain way. Ecological causes rank high. But, inspired by multiculturalism, the point may also be to criticize the West for failing to recognize other cultures' achievements or views of science, as in a major 2010 international exhibition that celebrated Islamic science with exaggeration and inaccuracy. Yale's new version of its Peabody Museum, which opened last year, even turns the distortion on itself, misrepresenting the Peabody's own history to strengthen its polemic against the accomplishments of Western science.

The real scandal of all of this is not that the Activist museum discards notions of neutrality for advocacy, but that it overlooks its own inaccuracies in order to serve its ideology. It has turned the museum landscape and culture into a subsidiary branch of politics. Taken in this context, the following statement by one of the fired Noguchi Museum gallery attendants seems inevitable: "I'm 26 years old, and it's hard for me to watch people much older than me, with more experience, more established, who have no principles, who have no values that they stand behind." This person has likely never seen a non-Activist museum, nor has a conception of what principles and values are in fact being upheld.

But this perspective from a museum worker can hardly be surprising. A 2023 essay published by the American Alliance of Museums argued that creating an effective Activist museum requires hiring an activist staff. The result, we are assured, would be "a more engaged, vibrant, and inclusive institutional culture that will benefit internal and external stakeholders and allow the institution to embrace its mission fully." Many museum studies curricula at universities give unusual attention to such activist ambitions. And there were many such examples of staff activism even before Gaza became the great cause. In 2020, staff at the Guggenheim Museum called on the institution to commit itself to "concrete action and change," demanding that it "terminate any and all contacts and agreements with the NYPD (within the next month)," that it replace members of the executive staff who would not commit to "restorative justice," and that it meet with "BIPOC leaders" and create a permanent full-time director-level position "dedicated to advocating for racial equality." A full-scale report in *The Atlantic* pointed out that one casualty was the museum's chief curator, whose life was overturned and career ended by baseless accusations of racism.

Given all this, it should have been no surprise that museums were the sites of so many demonstrations. The staff was intentionally recruited for its activist attitudes. Should anything different have been expected then, once Gaza was in the news?

But there is reason for some hope. While demonstrations at universities have shown that there are few administrators willing to confront the intellectual carnage on display, at most museums and many cultural institutions, action was taken. This may be because the museum or cultural institution could not always nestle into a progressive bubble. They may have become activist in spirit, but they still had to lure a wider public. And they had

some responsibility to the artifacts they were enjoined to preserve and care for, even if — as in some museums — the artifacts are hidden or ignored or undercut.

In addition, even when a museum is densely populated with progressive devotees, the Gaza protests, with their implicit support of Hamas, have shocked some of the very people who have, over the past decade, overseen the growing dominance of activist ideas in museums and universities. Sure, the protests rounded up the usual suspects, with allusions to racism and colonialism; the standard-issue high-moral pose was adopted; and the Nazis were ritually invoked, thus justifying outrage and violence in response. But to those retaining some sense of perspective, and their positions of leadership, it was clear that something didn't fit.

Will the jarring aspects of these events also cause some others to begin to question the activist project itself as one that distorts history in order to reach its conclusions? Among some Jews, and among some curators, and among a few university administrators, and perhaps even among some professors, the disjunction between theory and fact might shake the foundation of their convictions. In order for paradigms to shift, perhaps they must first be shaken by incompatibilities that cannot be explained away.

This is also the context for President Trump's much derided executive order in March, targeting the federally-run Smithsonian institutions. "Museums in our Nation's capital should be places where individuals go to learn — not to be subjected to ideological indoctrination or divisive narratives that distort our shared history." It correctly identifies the problem but not its source in the museums' educational and professional apparatus that has been developing for the past several decades. Addressing that will require more than a fiat. And the solution will not be a matter of giving a more "positive" spin to American history and ideas; it will require embracing a broader historical context than activist politics currently allows.

Is such a transformation imminent? Is it possible that the

Activist museum will, like the Activist university, suddenly find itself marginalized rather than embraced? Can we hope that the sheer absurdity of the protests and the charges being made might lead to an even greater round of self-questioning? Will it still seem important, a generation hence, to treat all of culture as a political masquerade?

We may know, soon enough. ✳

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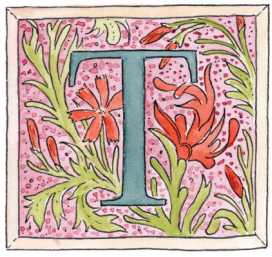
BRET STEPHENS

Can the Media Keep Kosher?

Objective and activist journalism both have vital roles to play—provided one doesn't mix with the other



THE LAMENT that political activism pervades too much of what passes for journalism isn't new. "Arrows of malevolence" was how George Washington, in 1793, described the lurid polemics of the Philadelphia-based *National Gazette*, a mouthpiece for the Jeffersonian Democratic-Republican Party. Later, after Jefferson was elected president, it was his turn to complain: "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper," he wrote a friend in 1807. He proposed a new formula for publishing the news: "Heading the 1st, Truths. 2d, Probabilities. 3d, Possibilities. 4th, Lies."

"The first chapter," he added tartly, "would be very short."

Activism remained the norm for American journalism for more than a century. Horace Greeley, William Randolph Hearst, and

Joseph Pulitzer were the great crusading publishers who used their newspapers to advance social and political causes. Ida B. Wells, Lincoln Steffens, Nellie Bly, and Ida Tarbell were the great crusading journalists who sought to expose racial injustices, abusive corporate practices, municipal corruption, and other social ills. They thought the highest purpose of their vocation was to filter facts, as they presented them, through moral truths, as they saw them.

This style of journalism lost influence in the early 20th century, partly thanks to the influence of a prominent American Jew, albeit one who didn't much care for his fellow Jews: Walter Lippmann. In one of his early influential essays, "Liberty and the News," Lippmann made the case for "disinterestedness" in news coverage. "The work of reporters," he warned, had

> become confused with the work of preachers, revivalists, prophets and agitators. The current theory of American newspaperdom is that an abstraction like the truth and a grace like fairness must be sacrificed whenever anyone thinks the necessities of civilization require the sacrifice.…When those who control [the news] arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable.

Lippmann's solution was "objective information," "objective testimony," "objective criteria," and "objective realities"—supplied or described through "disinterested reporting."

> The reporter needs a general sense of what the world is doing. Emphatically he ought not to be serving a cause, no matter how good. In his professional activity it is no business of his to care whose ox is gored.…While the reporter will serve no cause, he

will possess a steady sense that the chief purpose of "news" is to enable mankind to live successfully toward the future.

What Lippmann advocated became the standard of practice for most American broadsheet and broadcast reporting for much of the rest of the century, epitomized by the likes of the *New York Times*' A.M. Rosenthal, the *Washington Post*'s Ben Bradlee, and CBS's Walter Cronkite. Generations of journalism students were schooled in the idea that the best reporters were the ones who worked hardest to submerge, if not erase, their moral convictions, political beliefs, and personal backgrounds in the service of keeping the news straight — a sentiment Rosenthal chose as the epitaph on his tombstone.

In many ways, this ethos has served journalism exceptionally well, both among its professionals and its consumers. Reporting that has been scrubbed of personal bias can have credibility in a way that partisan reporting will usually lack, thereby establishing a common set of facts from which intelligent differences of opinion can emerge. A reporter's honest effort to check his priors, to listen to both sides of an issue and be fair to each, to be less judgmental and more curious, to guard against ideology, to be skeptical of the official line, to give readers the story without steering them toward a preferred conclusion — those are markers of intellectual health. At its best, objective journalism can be an exercise in liberal-mindedness, modeling a form of democratic citizenship that cares for truth while knowing that pursuing it requires doggedness as well as humility.

But objectivity also had pitfalls — ones that, in Lippmann's case, had a specifically Jewish coloration. His response to antisemitism was repeatedly to go out of his way to demonstrate that he would do no special pleading for a Jewish cause and would even malign other Jews as socially uncouth "parvenus" — all the better to demonstrate his supposed objectivity. He embraced Harvard's quotas limiting Jewish enrollment. He also initially welcomed Hitler's rise to power, speaking of the Führer as "the authentic voice of a genuinely civilized people" (a line that ended

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his friendship with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter).

His record over the next several years was, if anything, worse. "In more than 10 million printed words on world affairs, he said nothing about the death camps, or the revelation that the State Department actively tried to suppress information about them," noted Julien Gorbach of the University of Hawaii in a perceptive 2020 essay. "Nor did [Lippmann] mention the camps even after the war, when the full horror about them became known."

These sorts of prevarications illustrate how the ideal of objectivity, powerfully defensible in theory, sometimes goes badly astray in practice. Not only can it be blind to significant moral truths, but it can also, in the wrong hands, shade truth itself.

One example: Twenty-five years ago, on the eve of the second intifada, it became the lazy fashion among the foreign press in Israel to speak about "extremists on both sides" of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—a handy phrase for reporters to demonstrate their own evenhandedness. The problem is that the term *extremist* is elastic: A far-right Israeli who advocates settlement expansion in the West Bank may be an extremist by Western lights. But he's not the equivalent of a Palestinian calling, as Hamas did then and does now, for the enslavement, extermination, or forced exile of the Jews. The scales simply don't balance—and trying to make them do so to maintain a superficial appearance of objectivity means

minimizing the sins of one side and magnifying the sins of the other.

Another example: coverage of the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because the story required specialized knowledge, reporters tended to rely heavily on the opinions of public-health officials and others deemed to be objective, while dismissing the people promoting the lab-leak theory as racist know-nothings. But the belief among many reporters that experts would provide objective information turned out to be an illusion. At least some of those experts were compromised or shamelessly dishonest, while others thought they were operating in the name of a higher good that gave them the right to make things up.

Put simply, what began as an earnest attempt at journalistic objectivity lent itself, through a combination of credulity and disdain, to various forms of manipulation, the political consequences of which will live with us for years. That isn't to say that objectivity itself was the problem. But it is a tough standard to achieve and even tougher to maintain.

The most powerful trend in modern American journalism — one that began in the 1990s with the advent of Fox News and MSNBC and gained force on digital media thanks to people such as Andrew Breitbart, Josh Marshall, and many others — is the return of the activist model of journalism in ways that recall the late 18th or 19th centuries.

There are many things to say against this form of journalism: It's biased, sensationalist, polarizing, misinforming, partially false, flatly so. But it's also, in its way, honest. Few people who faithfully tune in to Fox or MSNBC are under the illusion that they are being served traditional straight news. Typically, they go to those channels because they want to have their worldview affirmed. They may think the version of events being offered to them is truer than the alternatives. But they also know those "truths" are hotly contested and geared toward

a political objective, one they generally prefer to the alternatives.

There is no great scandal in this. When Sean Hannity — or Rachel Maddow — says something that's distorted or untrue, I generally don't feel lied to (unless there's good reason to believe they know they are lying). Instead, I feel argued with, just as I would in any normal argument with an interlocutor straining facts or contorting logic to serve an ideological point. To demand scrupulous impartiality on their broadcasts is like expecting fancy linens at a Motel 6. As with any other kind of consumer, consumers of news media have a responsibility to know just what sort of establishment they're patronizing.

Nor are we worse off as a country for having so many choices for what counts as news. Americans were not necessarily better informed when an aristocracy of elite journalists effectively colluded with the White House to hide Franklin Roosevelt's infirmities or — a more recent example — Joe Biden's mental decline. The era in which Walter Cronkite ended his broadcast with "that's the way it is" may have served the tastes of an earnest and trusting public. But it also ran much larger risks of duping them. Much as the new activist media can polarize and distort, it can also serve as an invaluable check on the deceptions and self-deceptions of the establishment press.

Still, there is a scandal that has tarred important corners of American journalism for years. That's the increasingly activist bent within the newsrooms of the country's ostensibly impartial news organizations. This goes well beyond the ordinary human failings of objective reporting that remains framed by rigorous standards of accuracy and fairness. What we now have is something else: activist reporters and editors using the cover of objective news organizations to pursue nakedly ideological ends, suppress contrary opinions, and shape misleading, exaggerated, or false narratives that define political debates.

This is not to say that the mainstream media is "fake," as a certain political leader likes to say, or that there aren't thousands of diligent journalists doing their best to play it straight and keep

Quality of judgment will always depend on clarity of information.

their personal opinions out of their reports. There are. But there are also far too many rotten apples in the barrel. Clearing them out and restoring trust and credibility to the business lies in the hands of editors and publishers.

How did this scandal happen? Ten points come to mind:

- The old blue-collar journalism of figures such as Jimmy Breslin, which had an innate grasp of the experiences and thinking of regular people, has mostly disappeared. Elite journalism is now largely the domain of upper-middle-class professionals educated at elite universities. It reflects the conventions, convictions, and guilt complexes of a socioeconomic bubble.

- Certitude and "moral clarity"—a sly term of art among certain activist reporters—has increasingly replaced curiosity, skepticism, and intellectual humility as the dominant mindset among a younger generation of reporters.

- "Bothsidesism"—that is, giving voice to both sides of a controversial subject and allowing readers to draw their own conclusions—has come to be considered a cardinal journalistic sin on a proliferating number of topics. Other words for "bothsidesism" would be *balance* and *fairness*.

- In place of Lippmann's disinterestedness, newsrooms became obsessed with the value of racial and gender diversity, but one of an ideologically narrow kind.

- One form of diversity many newsrooms did not particularly value, however, was viewpoint diversity. Like-minded reporters

and editors fell prey to political groupthink, especially when it came to polarizing figures such as Donald Trump.

- The bright line between news and opinion faded in the gray zones of so-called news analysis and criticism, which gave reporters an opportunity to vent their opinions in revealing ways.

- Reporters also got in the habit of unloading their personal views on social-media posts — sometimes merely through a "like" or a repost — thereby undermining their claims of being impartial journalists.

- A plague of moralizing adjectives — *racist*, *sexist*, *-phobic*, and so on — came to infest the prose of supposedly straight news reporting. The adjectives often said more about the ideological persuasion of the reporters than they did about the prejudices of their subjects.

- Editors or reporters who dissented from newsroom orthodoxies on sensitive subjects suffered punitive professional consequences, often by way of transparently thin pretexts of supposedly unprofessional conduct.

- Not only did too much reporting become captive to the claims of experts, but reporters also tended to rely on experts whose views coincided with their own. That's how a reputable health economist such as Stanford's Jay Bhattacharya (now director of the National Institutes of Health) and other signatories of the Great Barrington Declaration, which called into question the wisdom of Covid lockdowns, were dismissed in much of the media as a bunch of cranks.

There's more to add, but these points help explain why, in 2024, only 18 percent of Americans had a lot of trust in newspapers, as opposed to 48 percent who had little to none, according to a Gallup survey. That's not only a damning vote of no confidence in the mainstream press. It's a threat to freedom.

A news media that repeatedly betrays its promise to play it straight impoverishes and coarsens the discourse of democracy. A news media that tries to substitute capital-T "Truth" on hot-button issues like race relations and climate change for the humbler truths of cold facts and diverse views will alienate the very audiences it most needs to win over. And a news media that loses the public trust is also one that's profoundly vulnerable to political pressure and bullying. When Trump takes legal actions against ABC or CBS for their reporting, or bars the Associated Press from covering presidential events because they won't refer to the "Gulf of America," it's no longer met with any great outrage—just a collective public shrug.

Is there a way back? There is, provided we are clear about where the problem lies, and where it doesn't.

The problem is not that the new activist media fails to live up to the standards or expectations of mainstream news: never has; never will. Activist journalism—colorful, ribald, opinionated, impassioned, contrarian, morally informed (or misinformed), frequently brilliant, occasionally right—will always have a place in the world of letters. Most of us wouldn't want it otherwise. And it isn't going away anytime soon. Media criticism that does little more than rail against it is a wasted effort.

Nor is the problem that the so-called legacy press has outlived its usefulness, or that objectivity itself is a false idol, or that objective reporting must, by definition, be morally blind. Even fervent critics of the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* will grudgingly concede that their reporting is essential, whether it's from the Ukrainian front lines or the fentanyl labs of Mexico or the boardrooms of major companies. And the point of objective media isn't to obscure the moral elements of a story: It's to depict the story clearly and trust readers to reach intelligent moral judgments of their own. Quality of judgment will always depend on clarity of information.

The problem is the mixing of *milchig* and *fleishig*, dairy and meat, in activist and mainstream media alike. Fox News pretends to play its news coverage straight—but then fires political analyst Chris Stirewalt for the sin of calling the 2020 election in Arizona for Joe Biden. Mainstream media insists on fidelity to objective journalistic values—but often seems to turn itself into a de facto arm of political opposition whenever a Republican is in the White House. That some in the mainstream media don't even seem to be consciously aware that they do so merely underscores the depth of their failing.

The solution is a more clear separation, in order to maintain the distinctiveness of each. If activist media organizations still leave anyone in doubt about their agendas, perhaps they should be more explicit about them. Years ago, the late Roger Ailes ruefully confessed to me that a more honest version of his network's motto might have been "Fair and Balanc*ing*." At least it would have been an improvement over "Fair and Balanced" (though "Argumentative and Entertaining" might have been better). Except for the bounds of law—libel and defamation; hacking or trespass—the activist media should be even less bound by objective journalistic conventions. The world could use more truth in advertising and a more unabashed form of bending the truth.

At the same time, for all the reasons mentioned above, the world desperately needs a less distorting form of telling the whole truth—without fear or favor; without bias or obfuscation; with the consistency and credibility to win back a wary, tuned-out, and often cynical audience. How can the mainstream media do it once again? It really shouldn't be that difficult. See the bullet-pointed list above. Then, like George Costanza, do the opposite. ✳

March 28, 2025

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PART TWO

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

ARIELLA SAPERSTEIN

Why Has Palestinian Activism Been So Successful?

And what can the pro-Israel movement learn?

WHAT DOES it take to build a movement? According to Simon Greer, a longtime community and labor organizer active in Obama's 2008 presidential campaign who now does anti-polarization work, social movements go through several distinct developmental stages as they grow and achieve lasting change.

First, successful movements usually begin on the margins of society, where they offer a critique of the mainstream, pointing out a contradiction between the society's stated values and its reality. This is where and how the movement gathers its initial energy. For example, the civil rights movement began with labor efforts such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (the first all-black union founded in 1925) and highlighted the tension between the American ideals of "liberty and justice for all" and the realities of racial segregation.

Gaining steam, an activist movement then cultivates its own

language, narrative, and culture expressed through coherent and replicable practice. In the civil rights movement, "We Shall Overcome" and similar songs were adopted by communities and popular singers alike, broadening the influence of the movement by promoting acts of nonviolent resistance: freedom rides, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches.

These practices quickly engendered a sense of community and belonging. Previously on the margins, a successful movement now begins to take on a magnetic force, drawing in followers from the mainstream once the social rewards of affiliation outweigh the social costs that may have once seemed insurmountable. In the 1960s, it was groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the legendary Baptist churches of the South that served as centers of such rich, purposeful community.

The community then selects and elevates some of its members as heroes and martyrs — Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr. Attaching names to the communal narrative enhances its epic quality as a story that not only continues in the energetic present but that will endure well into the future when these names will be solidly memorialized.

In the final stage, a successful movement shifts societal norms, winning a combination of hearts and minds, structures and systems. By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement had not only achieved various formal goals, including the Supreme Court's 1955 ruling striking down bus segregation and the passage of the Civil Rights Act ten years later, it had also meaningfully shifted the culture. Public attitudes toward race and civil rights had transformed across America, desegregation was the law, and government agencies worked to create opportunities for black Americans. The times, they were a-changin'.

But the times can also change for the worse. The success of a movement is not proof of its moral warrant. Plenty of nefarious

movements — National Socialism in Germany, Soviet Communism in Russia — have seen their way through the same stages of development described above. Unlike civil rights in the United States, these movements led to social catastrophe rather than progress, even spreading their disastrous means and ends to other countries.

This is what we are witnessing today in the anti-Israel movement. The parallels of the above trajectory to this movement's success are well worth exploring, if only to examine what a more effective movement in support of Israel might look like.

Beginning on the margins. Before it registered on the radar screen of most Americans, the Palestinian narrative began to take hold in academia as the 1968 generation made its way into university humanities and social science departments. As Rachel Fish has documented in these pages, Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978, and a scholarship based on Marxism and postcolonialism slowly began to fester in academic obscurity. It took some years before Palestinian "resistance" against Israeli "domination" became de rigueur in elite universities, but it did so by generating energy on the margins of intellectual, political, and cultural discourse. The political version of what was happening in the academy was the Black Power movement, also at odds with the prevailing integrationist ethos, which came to embrace Palestinian militancy, giving a distant foreign movement an important ally on the fringes of American society.

Celebrity performers with fringe politics also eventually got in on the act: Vanessa Redgrave dedicated her 1978 Oscar to the "proud" Palestinian people standing up against "Zionist hoodlums." (Before the evening was over, she was rebuked on the same stage by Paddy Chayefsky, to great applause.)

Pointing out a contradiction between a society's stated values and its reality. As part of the antiestablishment culture of the 1960s, especially on campus, Palestinian activists positioned themselves

The pro-Palestinian movement appropriated the language of human rights and, later, antiracism, arguing that standing up to institutional power meant opposing Zionism.

as scrappy underdogs speaking truth to power (never mind that it was Israel that remained the real underdog in the region, not yet a beneficiary of American security guarantees, while facing the enmity of the entire Arab world and its allies in the Soviet Union). The Six-Day War of 1967, which although fought in defense resulted in the expansion of Israel's territory, only bolstered their position that Israel was belligerent and undeserving of Western, particularly European, support. The pro-Palestinian movement appropriated the language of human rights and, later, antiracism, arguing that standing up to institutional power meant opposing Zionism, even if it involved rejecting, rewriting, and politicizing history.

Cultivating its own language, narrative, and culture expressed through a coherent and replicable practice. The academic year of 2023–24 made the chant of "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" ubiquitous. But the Palestinian movement has long created easily replicable models for activism, particularly on campus. Israel Apartheid Week began in 2005 and quickly spread to major cities across the world, as well as becoming an annual staple at American and Canadian universities. Around the same time, BDS resolutions on campus, usually in the form of student referendums in which small percentages of students participate, gained traction. Although more than half have been defeated and none have yet been adopted at the administrative level, they have

So much for Jewish control of the media: In many print, broadcast, and social-media institutions, to be an activist on behalf of the Palestinians is to be mainstream, while to be Jewish or Zionist is to be marginalized.

given momentum to a movement. The result is that divestment has made its way to the trustees of several universities.

Nowhere did we see how quickly a practice can be replicated than with the campus encampments that started with Columbia in April 2024: By the end of the month, copycat encampments had taken hold on 40 additional campuses.

Language that had been largely confined to academia was mainstreamed within the movement: *apartheid*, *colonialism*, *ethnic cleansing*. Despite the Israeli government's clear articulation that it is waging war against Hamas, the movement effectively rebranded it as a war on Palestinians, whom we have recently seen protesting Hamas themselves. The keffiyeh became a fashion statement. After October 7, the watermelon as a symbol of Palestinian "resistance" was being worn as a pin by airline attendants and public library staff. Paraglider imagery glorifying the way some Palestinian terrorists entered Israel on October 7 became hipster chic.

Engendering a sense of community and belonging. The chicness of pro-Palestinian activism has been strong since at least the founding of Students for Justice in Palestine in 1993. Fueled by dubious funding sources, the organization operates socially as a kind of anarchic political avant-garde. It has often been the first student group to ally with others on the political Left, claiming in the early

2000s, for example, that divestment from Israel was an equivalent demand to divestment from Sudan. They have done so as a way to expand the community, situating themselves as the center of social revolutionary gravity. While the rise of intersectionality brought the Palestinian movement many more allies among other racial and ethnic groups, the explosion of public support for "anti-racism" and Black Lives Matter in 2020 further mainstreamed the Palestinian cause within the movement for racial justice. Members of Congress such as Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib added political weight to the progressive-Palestinian alliance, and the number of clueless students joining the encampments in 2024 made clear that there was social capital to be gained by joining the protests. Amid a much-cited loneliness epidemic exacerbated by school lockdowns, young people are especially susceptible to the appeal of community in activism.

Elevating heroes and martyrs. While most students joining the encampments had not yet been born in 2000, the Muhammad al-Durrah affair of that year turned Palestinian children into martyrs of the movement. Following allegations that the 12-year-old child was killed by IDF fire, multiple investigations (including a meticulous report by James Fallows in *The Atlantic*) found it more likely that he had been killed by Palestinian fire — or possibly not killed at all. Cast as a Palestinian Emmett Till, al-Durrah was followed by Ahed Tamimi, arrested as a teenager for assaulting an Israeli soldier. Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who went to prison for hijacking a plane in 1969, was invited to speak at multiple college campuses in recent years (then becoming a free speech cause célèbre when some of these events were canceled under pressure). At George Washington University, Students for Justice in Palestine marked this stage by projecting the words *Glory to our martyrs* onto the walls of the university library. Now there is Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia University activist whose arrest by the Trump

administration has turned him into a political martyr among progressives and libertarians for free speech.

Shifting societal norms. While the Palestinian movement still claims to be marginalized, it has been funded by some of the biggest names in philanthropy: Ford, Soros, Rockefeller, and others. The BDS movement has been legitimized through serious debate at the university trustee level, and its cause has been taken up by the human-rights establishment. Riding the wave of intersectionality, DEI frameworks, and antiracism, Palestinian activists — with the support of Qatari funding — have influenced K–12 education through teachers' unions, ethnic studies, and even pre-K lessons (college students need no longer take a Middle East studies class at Columbia to be inclined to see Israel as a colonizer and apartheid state). They have taken over Pride marches and the Women's March (resulting in a meltdown over antisemitism), and blocked bridges, highways, and Thanksgiving Day parades.

So much for Jewish control of the media: In many print, broadcast, and social-media institutions, to be an activist on behalf of the Palestinians is to be mainstream, while to be Jewish or Zionist is to be marginalized. The Palestinian cause is part of the anti-Western zeitgeist that has taken hold of large portions of our education and government systems, not to mention areas where it seems completely irrelevant. At Columbia it has been included in classes on astronomy and architecture. The students reading *Orientalism* in the 1980s are now themselves teaching at elite universities, running NGOs and philanthropic foundations, and publishing widely.

Social-media platforms — and the mostly progressive influencers that dominate them — have given unprecedented reach to the Palestinian cause, with 86 percent of college students learning about the ongoing Hamas–Israel war through such avenues. Another popular (and now trusted) source for information, Wikipedia, has been commandeered by Palestinian activist editors and writers injecting their

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own bias and falsehoods into dozens of articles, including the entry on Zionism.

Misinformation in both social and mainstream media runs rampant because many journalists are predisposed to believe the Palestinian narrative: When there was an explosion at a Gazan hospital early in the war, everyone from the BBC to the *New York Times* breathlessly amplified Hamas reports of an Israeli strike that caused 500 civilian deaths. That nearly every fact of this story was quickly shown to be untrue caused little soul-searching: The BBC is now investigating itself all over again for airing a documentary that relied on and whitewashed Hamas propaganda.

The most recent Gallup poll, in February 2025, shows fewer than half of Americans expressing more sympathy for Israel than the Palestinians, with Democrats sympathizing with the Palestinians over Israel by a 3–1 margin (59 percent to just 21 percent). Even among independents, just 42 percent felt more sympathy toward Israel.

If this isn't mainstream, what is?

It would be a mistake to ascribe the ascent of the Palestinian movement to any one set of factors, including those enumerated here. The role of the media, for example, does not fit neatly

into this rubric but surely plays a more significant part than the above suggests. And, of course, to compare the pro-Palestinian movement to the American civil rights movement would be an insult to one of the most important and meaningful social justice movements in history. Palestinian activists have twisted history and good-faith politics in their efforts: Mohammad Al-Durrah, Ahed Tamimi, and Marwan Barghouti are not James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. The BDS movement lacks the noble aims of the Montgomery bus boycott, but to ill-educated students, the dishonesty is invisible. Palestinian activists have, in many ways, adopted the tactics of the civil rights movement for a far darker cause, building community and momentum around a narrative that should collapse in the face of rigorous scrutiny, and Israel's activists have been understandably unwilling to play by the same rules (or lack thereof).

The winds of culture don't seem to be in Israel's favor. Still, it is worth asking what American Jews can learn from a movement-building perspective. Who are our heroes, and what are our mantras? How can we draw attention to the hypocrisy of shunning Israel among those fighting for human rights and against racism? And how do we build a community that others want to join?

Encampments took hold disproportionately at elite universities, yet that is also where the Jewish community spends much of its energy. Jewish college students are exhausted and constantly on the defensive. Perhaps rather than spending our resources fighting BDS resolutions at Harvard (whose attractiveness is already falling among Jews), we should tell Israel's story at the schools where it isn't heard. (SAPIR editor-in-chief Bret Stephens reports that one of the most robust conversations on Israel he's had on campus took place at Colorado Mesa University, a campus with slightly older students, including many veterans.)

David Bernstein, Rajiv Malhotra, Tyler Gregory, Dana White, and others have written in these pages about new allies — Asian Americans, Hindu Americans, historically black colleges and

universities — where Israel activists can build community. As the tides turn against the ideological conformity of DEI, Israel activists have an opportunity to ride the momentum of the American desire for a return to sanity, including the values that undergird support for Israel.

The Israeli narrative resists simplification and therefore sloganeering. But in the age of protest and social media, pithy and memorable messaging is crucial. Israel is a story of self-determination, innovation, and resilience. Let's tell it less apologetically and more boldly and confidently than ever before. And — maybe — let's read the playbook as closely as our enemies have. ✳

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MAXIM D. SHRAYER

Refusenik Lessons for Today

The gift of Jewish self-interest

N THE EARLY 1980s, a poignant hangman's joke entered unsanctioned Soviet culture. When one telephoned the notorious Office of Visas and Permissions, the recorded message was "Please wait to be refused."

The joke is even more spot-on today as it corrects a common misconception about what it meant to be a refusenik. An imperfect calque of the Russian term *otkaznik* (from *otkaz*, or refusal), the term *refusenik* has acquired a somewhat misleading grammatical quality when used in English. Refuseniks were Soviet Jews and members of their families who, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, petitioned the Soviet state to allow them to emigrate to Israel but had their applications denied ("refused"). It would have been more accurate to call us *refusees*, "the refused ones," since it was not we refuseniks but the Soviet regime who did the refusing, by repeatedly rejecting our petitions

to emigrate and thus denying our ability to practice our Jewish identity freely and openly.

But there was something all refuseniks actively did refuse to do: remain Soviet. As a political and cultural movement of Jewish national self-liberation, the refuseniks were a response to the post-war plight of Soviet Jewry, a condition that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. characterized in December 1966 as auguring "a possibility of a complete spiritual and cultural destruction." In fighting the Soviet regime, refuseniks were tried for "anti-Soviet" activity and experienced career erasure and ostracism, arrests and physical violence. Heroic refusenik men and women such as Yosef Begun or Ida Nudel served prison sentences and endured years of exile. But for all refuseniks, the official punishment was in stolen years.

Not all refuseniks were activists in the conventional Western sense, but all refuseniks carried out the mission of Jewish self-liberation both in and from the USSR. In this sense, we were very different from the other Eastern Bloc dissidents and rights-defenders with whom we were contemporaneous. In the words of the historian Juliane Fürst, we "refused to be part of the Soviet Union…refused to be dissidents…refused to be responsible for changing the world." When it came to the fate of Soviet society, our priority was simply that it be different from our own. Unlike the Soviet dissident intellectuals who wished to revive and expand Khrushchev's post-Stalinist liberalization (known as the Thaw) or to reform the Soviet application of Marxist-Leninist principles, we refuseniks simply wanted out. Our interest was in Jewish collective and personal liberation from Soviet tyranny. To put it bluntly, we wanted to leave the USSR, not save it.

Both the dichotomy and the disparity between dissidence and refusenikdom appears in the interactions between them. As Jewish activists, refuseniks recognized the importance of being repre-

sented in the chorus of Soviet rights-defenders. Of the 11 original members of the Moscow Helsinki Group, a prominent dissident human-rights group founded in 1976, two, Natan Sharansky and Vitaly Rubin, were Jewish refuseniks (Vladimir Slepak would replace Rubin), and four more were of Jewish origin (Malva Landa, Yelena Bonner, Aleksandr Ginzburg, and Mikhail Bernshtam). Of the original members, all but one ended up emigrating on Israeli visas or being forced by the KGB to go into exile abroad. The one who did not find himself abroad, the exalted human-rights activist Anatoly Marchenko, died in 1986 at the prison hospital in Tatarstan.

At the peak of dissident activities in the USSR of the late 1960s and 1970s, some of the dissident letters of protest against Soviet injustices would garner many hundreds of signatures. However, many of the dissidents' public actions were of minimal impact and consequence or were confined to the ranks of Soviet intellectual and artistic elite.

Refusenik activism was different. Every refusenik, not just refusenik zealots, projected Jewish resistance. Not only those imprisoned or exiled to remote areas of the USSR (called Prisoners of Zion) but rank-and-file refuseniks — whose main action was to keep resubmitting their documents and petitioning the Soviet government to be allowed to emigrate — lived and breathed activism. Refuseniks in their daily lives openly challenged the system by publicly declaring that they didn't wish to remain Soviets. Whereas dissidents could engage in private activism while leading normal Soviet public lives, every refusenik was permanently engaged in a daily public act of protest against the system. This was, perhaps, one of the regime's greatest miscalculations. In the late 1970s and 1980s, it was virtually impossible to live in a large Soviet city like Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Kyiv, Kharkiv, Minsk, or Novosibirsk without becoming aware of the refusenik problem. While it was possible to be active as an anonymous or private dissident, it was impossible to be a private or anonymous refusenik. At its core, refusenikdom was public Jewish activism.

Our interest was in Jewish collective and personal liberation from Soviet tyranny. To put it bluntly, we wanted to leave the USSR, not save it.

By the time the joke came around in the early 1980s, Andropov's KGB had succeeded in bringing the dissident movement to a standstill through intimidation, trials, arrests and imprisonments, and the forced exile of leading dissidents to the West. Jewish refuseniks were the only standing force and movement of Soviet citizens who were defiant and publicly challenged the Soviet regime — in their struggle, political, religious, and cultural activities, protests and performances, and daily lives.

For my parents, the refusenik activists David Shrayer-Petrov and Emilia Shrayer (née Polyak), and me, the life in refusenik limbo lasted for eight and a half years. We lived in a large Moscow apartment building in an area known for its research and military facilities. Our apartment building, located just a stone's throw from the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy, had a significant population of research scientists and senior commissioned military personnel. There were five entrances in our 12-story building, each a stack with 48 apartments. That's a total of 240 individual apartments. And if any of our roughly 800 neighbors didn't know that we were refuseniks, they might as well have lived under a rock. We were one of two refusenik families in our building, and in the Soviet urban style of living, with its chronic dearth of privacy, political anonymity was nearly impossible.

One day, we found a homemade poster with the words "Traitors, Get the Hell Out" glued to our apartment door. It was ironic, of course, given that getting the hell out was exactly what we wanted to do and would have, had the regime allowed it. And finally,

The sentimentality of Jewish activism in the civil rights movement tends to obscure the real force behind the movement: the *self-interest* of the movement's black leaders. A similar self-interest fueled the refusenik movement.

in April 1987, we received the long-awaited permission. Veteran refuseniks in fact became an acid test of Gorbachev's perestroika. While some of the former dissidents let themselves believe that their hopes and dreams of a reformed USSR had finally been realized, the refuseniks weren't convinced. To us, perestroika wasn't liberation but prison reform.

The refusenik movement offers important lessons about and for Jewish activism today.

First, it was the unapologetic Jewish self-interest of refusenikdom that made it so unstoppable and effective. Many of the leaders and elders of the refusenik community understood that their strength lay in their stubborn and specific focus on Jewish self-liberation, not the liberation of all Soviet-oppressed peoples. As Hillel Butman, former Prisoner of Zion and one of the main figures of the so-called Airplane Affair (the 1970 attempted hijacking of a civilian aircraft to escape from the USSR), stated in 2008 in Jerusalem, "We concentrated all of energy toward emigrating to Israel. We had nothing to do with 'their'

problem." Refusenik activism was an antidote to Jewish assimilation or obliteration.

There is an important insight in this that cuts against the predominant story of Jewish postwar activism, namely for civil rights in America. Students of American Jewish history tend to celebrate and take pride in Jewish participation in that movement while often failing to see a powerful alternative in the activism of Jewish refuseniks. The sentimentality of Jewish activism in the civil rights movement tends to obscure the real force behind the movement: the *self-interest* of the movement's black leaders. A similar self-interest fueled the refusenik movement. The parallel makes clear that self-interest is often a driving force behind successful liberation movements. The personal and communal stake in success fostered and sustained the determination of the refusenik movement, imbuing it with a balance of idealism and pragmatism, grit and patience. For me, one of the main lessons of growing up a refusenik is that, through self-interest, oppressed groups not only shine light on the scandal of their oppression but develop the right strategy to overturn it. One would be hard-pressed to find meaningful examples to the contrary, and it is a perspective that Jewry inside and outside of Israel would do well to accept.

But the more counterintuitive truth is that self-interested activist movements are better positioned and more likely to win liberation not only for themselves but for others. The civil rights movement began in the interest of racial desegregation but ultimately extended far beyond. Similarly, the refusenik movement helped usher in the collapse of the Soviet system. As Natan Sharansky, probably the most celebrated of refusenik heroes, put it in May 2015, "The freedom we succeeded in gaining for ourselves…we also helped many other people in the former Soviet Union to gain.…The greatest in number, the most powerful dissident movement, which ultimately evolved to break down the Soviet Union, was the Jewish movement." What refusenik activism did for other Soviet citizens, for the country, and for the dissident

movement was a consequence. The purpose of the refusenik movement was to free Jews from the Soviet bondage. By insisting on its own goals, the Soviet Jewry movement achieved those goals for others as well. Ours was an activism on behalf of Jews that also made the world a better place, not the other way around. By opposing the Soviet system in its entirety rather than wanting to fix it, disassociating from it rather than seeking its improvement, the movement to save Soviet Jewry ended up liberating the rest of Soviet citizenry as well.

The fiction in the Soviet Union was that only the ("ungrateful") Jews wanted to leave. The fact was that only the Soviet Jews (and to some extent the Soviet ethnic Germans) were willing to fight for it. To live as a self-conscious Jew, or in the state's prescribed post-1967 vocabulary, a "Zionist," was inherently activist. When I became a student at Moscow University in 1984, it took only a few months (in the uncomputerized Soviet society) for the university administration to get wind of my refusenikdom and to attempt my expulsion. In the autumn of 1985, as my father was going through the worst spiral of persecution as a "Zionist writer," which almost resulted in his trial, an article in a central Soviet newspaper ran a concocted account of his activities. Because of this article, my university classmates learned of my familial connection with a "Zionist," and in retrospect some of them regarded Jewish refuseniks with a mix of affected apprehension and romantic admiration. In Soviet society, everything one did mattered not just to oneself and one's immediate circle but to everyone else, and refuseniks were not only a Jewish slap in the face of Soviet ideology but a tacit reminder to hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens that not all was lost. When we finally received permission to leave, I had a visit from a university classmate, who just showed up at my apartment. He asked for a favor:

> Refuseniks were not only a Jewish slap in the face of Soviet ideology but a tacit reminder to hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens that not all was lost.

Would I locate a relative of his, a former displaced person, who had been living somewhere in Germany or Austria since 1945? The people knew they were imprisoned and that the rest of humanity stood ready to receive them on the other side of the bars, and they recognized the refuseniks as harbingers of freedom.

And here is found another truth about activism: that it often begets other activism. To apply for emigration from the USSR, Jews and their families needed an invitation or affidavit (in Russian, *vyzov*) issued by the State of Israel. This meant that our activism was directed not only at the visa office and at Soviet society, but toward Israel and the Jewish communities of the free world. Living in opposition to our own society, as we did, also increased our own visibility outside the system of Soviet oppression and prompted activism by people we never knew.

Those people played a crucial role on the streets of Cleveland, Boston, Washington, and Montreal. In our systematic persecution and disenfranchisement, one of the few things that kept us connected to the world was the advocacy of the American and Canadian activists on behalf of Soviet Jewry. These valiant men and women — emissaries of the free world — traveled to the USSR not to admire Moscow cathedrals or St. Petersburg vistas but to bring us back a message of support. Imagine a Friday night in the middle of a severe Russian winter in 1983. It sometimes felt like refusenikdom would last forever. And then the doorbell of our

Moscow apartment would ring, and it would be a Jewish family from Tucson or Newton. We would share a simple Shabbos meal, and they made us feel a part of the greater Jewish community. And the Soviet regime begrudgingly took heed. Supporters outside the USSR visited us, wrote to us, marched on our behalf, and lobbied their elected officials. During a hunger strike of women refuseniks in the spring of 1987, my mother and other women received dozens of telegrams of support from North America, Israel, and Western Europe. This was real, as were also the political tools the United States employed to pressure the USSR, such as the Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974, requiring that non-market-economy (originally Soviet Bloc) countries comply with specific free-emigration criteria as a prerequisite for receiving economic benefits in trade relations with the United States.

These examples of Jewish and American political activism were predicated on the activism by Soviet Jews on behalf of their fellow Soviet Jews. When one looks back at the movement and its beginnings, as the historian of antisemitism Izabella Tabarovsky has done, another lesson comes into view: persistence and pridefulness. The movement began in 1969 with a letter from 18 families of Georgian Jews to Golda Meir. Jewish emigration began as a trickle, with 1,000 Jews leaving for Israel in 1970. According to the Soviet census data, there were 2.151 million Jews in the USSR in 1970, 1.811 million in 1979, and 1.449 million in 1989. As the demographer Mark Tolts demonstrated, between 1970 and 1988, about 291,000 Jews and their family members emigrated from the USSR, of whom 165,000 went to Israel and 126,000 to the United States. After the fall of the Soviet Union, between 1989 and 2009, 1,634,000 Jews and their family members emigrated from the USSR and post-Soviet states, of whom 998,000 went to Israel, 326,000 to the United States, and 224,000 to Germany. With about 120,000 Jews remaining, mainly in Russia and Ukraine, we are living and witnessing an *endspiel* of Jewish history in the lands of the former Soviet empire.

After decades of activism in the Soviet empire, the refusenik movement relocated to the free world, making Israel stronger and more diverse while also rendering American Jewish communities more politically motivated and more committed to Israel. The "Jews of silence" (to use Elie Wiesel's 1966 moniker for Soviet Jews) have turned out to be some of the most vocal and active Jews.

And yet today in the West, and especially after October 7, the dynamic has flipped from the days of the Cold War. Protests on Western streets no longer agitate for Jewish freedom. Instead, they argue against it, regurgitating Soviet rhetoric about Jewish sovereignty.

The legacy of refusenik activism is that Jews united by mission and common struggle, Jews entertaining no historical illusions or false hopes, can and will prevail against historic odds. ✳

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MALKA SHAW

The Encampment Mindset

On the psychology of student protests

IF THERE WAS a moment of levity during the student takeover of Columbia University's Hamilton Hall last year, it came unwittingly, when Johannah King-Slutzky, a doctoral candidate and representative for the People's University protest group, issued an ultimatum at a press conference. "Do you want students to die of dehydration and starvation or get severely ill, even if they disagree with you?" she asked. "If the answer is no, then you should allow basic — I mean, it's crazy to say because we're on an Ivy League campus, but this is basic humanitarian aid we're asking for. Like, could people please have a glass of water?"

To observe the campus protest movement last year was to hear multiple variations of this: outspoken students making bizarre, outlandish, or self-defeating claims in service of their cause. How did this come to be? A dive into the psychological forces that drive young people toward activism — and how those forces can shape their perception of reality — offers an answer.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl's 1946 book on psychotherapy and his survival in Nazi concentration camps, the Viennese psychologist references a Johns Hopkins survey of thousands of college students. "Asked what they considered 'very important' to them now," he recounts, only "16 percent of the students checked 'making a lot of money'; 78 percent said their first goal was 'finding a purpose and meaning to my life.'"

Psychological research in the decades since has confirmed that pursuing meaning, particularly at this stage of life, is key to developing one's identity. Young adults often channel this drive into activism, which presents a structured way to explore values, develop agency, and build social roles. When done correctly, activism fosters purpose, empowerment, and connection.

Activism appeals to young adults because it helps them assert independence and set themselves apart from their childhood experiences. A few years after Frankl released his book, the child psychoanalyst Erik Erikson put forward his influential theory of psychosocial development, in which adolescence and early adulthood are critical for forming identities. Young people crave purpose, autonomy, and belonging—all of which can be found in activist movements.

For some, however, activism becomes an identity. Rather than being a mechanism for maturing, it extends adolescence. Research in positive psychology posits that long-term activism can lock in moral absolutism and social rebellion. When activism becomes one's identity, the person stops engaging with issues critically and becomes ideologically static, hindering personal growth rather than nurturing it.

And for many young people, identifying purpose can often be accompanied by incoherence. Studies show that young adults' political and social views often contain contradictions and cognitive dissonance. A 2023 Harvard Youth Poll found that while most young Americans support expanding government programs, many of them are also concerned about government overreach.

Similarly, surveys indicate that young activists who want to restrict harmful speech also strongly support free expression.

These inconsistencies stem from absorbing information rapidly and reaching judgments without fully developed critical reasoning or life experience. Fast-moving digital activism allows little time for reflection or synthesis. Sets of ideas solidify quickly, despite their internal contradictions, leading the young activist to hold conflicting beliefs simultaneously. Emotional reactions replace analysis; ideological rigidity replaces complexity.

There is a certain ecstasy in joining others to fight for something you believe puts you on "the right side of history." Neurologically, this is because black-and-white thinking activates the brain's reward system, particularly dopamine pathways. Positive sensation reinforces belief: It feels good to be on this side of history.

This is where the distortion of reality sets in. The real world is too complex to be reduced to this binary matrix. But if one's brain has become addicted to the sensation of certainty, it will concoct descriptions and narratives of reality in ways that fit the binary to maintain the sensation of certainty. This is essentially what ideological fervor is: a commitment to a version of reality that fits one's mental preference. And it often manifests in the repeating and spreading of narratives and the search for facts that can be slotted into those narratives without complicating them.

While all people can fall for false narratives, some are more vulnerable than others. Research on cognitive biases and social influence suggests that emotionally dysregulated individuals — those who feel alienated or who lack a strong internal sense of identity — are more attracted to movements offering moral clarity. The brain's craving for certainty is heightened during periods of stress, when we hunger for a sense of control and purpose. Peer validation, social-media approval, and a heightened

> Activism appeals to young adults because it helps them assert independence and set themselves apart from their childhood experiences.

sense of belonging within the movement further compound these sensations.

What happens when a young adult, whose prefrontal cortex is still developing, becomes enveloped in a movement promoting distorted justice and scapegoating? Needing to improve the world, she enters an echo chamber that consistently confirms bias. This keeps the dopamine flowing.

Add more free time, energy, few responsibilities, and media messaging that frames systematic change as an urgent personal responsibility. What emerges is a cycle of chronic stress, anxiety, paranoia, and burnout, resolved only by repeatedly intensifying one's commitment to the movement.

The psychological pull of student activism grows even greater when young adults engage in increasingly aggressive or harmful actions without facing meaningful consequences. The well-established concept of "operant conditioning" explains how behaviors that are not punished or subtly rewarded become reinforced over time. If students disrupt classes, forcibly take over buildings, or harass others with few repercussions, their brains take this as approval to escalate further. The lack of consequences removes deterrents and serves as positive reinforcement, making students feel emboldened, righteous, and untouchable.

The course of radicalism at Columbia illustrates this process. When policy violations went largely unpunished, activists continued

to push boundaries, culminating in incidents such as the Hamilton Hall takeover and the violent Barnard College demonstration of February 2025. During the protest, a Barnard employee was physically assaulted to the point that he required hospitalization.

Perhaps the most perverse psychological achievement of recent anti-Israel activism has been its application of techniques from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) in order to manipulate emotions and suppress critical thinking.

These tools, designed to build resilience and self-awareness, have been systematically repurposed for indoctrination. Their methods allow individuals to justify actions that under normal circumstances would violate their ethical or moral standards — especially when targeting already dehumanized or demonized groups.

- Take, for example, *thought-stopping*, a CBT technique initially designed to help individuals manage intrusive thoughts. The technique involves getting the patient to disrupt the intrusive thought with a verbal or physical cue. Focus on the cue distracts the brain from the intrusive thought, lessening the distress of the intrusion. In an activism context, this cue is the repetition of certain slogans and chants, which serve to shut down cognitive dissonance before it can take hold.

  Suppose an activist starts to question her beliefs or she experiences dissonance with the movement's actions. In that case, she is conditioned to suppress those intrusive thoughts by reciting phrases like "From the river to the sea" or "No justice, no peace" — mantras that override deeper reflection and reinforce a sense of moral urgency. Reflexive responses replace doubt with automatic reaffirmations.

- Another example, central to indoctrination, is *cognitive reframing*: actively managing one's interpretation of situations,

events, and experiences. This technique, which helps a patient replace pessimistic or catastrophizing thinking with more realistic frameworks, has been weaponized to justify moral disengagement from the excesses of a movement. For example, harm against a perceived oppressor can be reframed as *justice*, eliminating ethical concerns.

- *Radical acceptance*, a core component of DBT originally designed to help individuals acknowledge reality without unnecessary suffering, is exploited to encourage blind adherence to ideological narratives. Individuals are told they must "accept" certain historical or political claims as indisputable facts, with skepticism framed as failure, complicity, or betrayal. By discouraging doubt, this technique solidifies an unquestioning commitment to the movement's objectives.

- *Distress-tolerance skills*, another DBT-based intervention, are also co-opted to sustain ideological rigidity. Normally, these skills help individuals endure emotional discomfort without reacting impulsively. In an indoctrination context, distress tolerance is reframed as a call to "push through" any cognitive or emotional discomfort caused by contradictions within the movement. Rather than questioning or reflecting, individuals are encouraged to suppress unease by doubling down on activism, reframing moral concerns as distractions from the "greater cause."

- Yet another technique is *exposure desensitization*, similar to exposure therapy's use to reduce fear responses to stimuli, such as sending someone who has a fear of dogs on a walk with a dog. The person gradually learns that his fear is an emotional reaction even in the absence of actual danger. This is helpful for acclimating students to criminal acts that have no serious repercussions.

What might have initially seemed extreme and improper acts, such as tearing down posters of kidnapped civilians or verbally

attacking perceived opponents, become normalized as individuals are slowly exposed to them within the movement. The severity of the actions increases to the point that once-unthinkable behaviors are framed as routine, necessary, virtuous.

Combining these psychological techniques, anti-Israel activism suppresses critical thinking, deepens ideological commitment, and erodes moral boundaries. Individuals are conditioned to silence internal doubt, physically synchronize with the group, and desensitize to extreme actions.

Eventually, they no longer feel the weight of their actions — only the rush of collective validation and the illusion of absolute moral certainty.

Needless to say, this can happen on either side of the protest when it is pursued to an extreme, especially when all the ingredients are manifested. Some personality traits and life circumstances, however, predispose individuals to ideological indoctrination:

1. High agreeableness
2. Strong need for belonging
3. Profound dissatisfaction
4. Lack of purpose
5. Histories of abuse (leaving individuals seeking validation and structure)
6. Certain personality disorders
7. The autism spectrum (i.e., the person may have challenges with empathy or understanding others' perspectives and social dynamics)

Over time, prolonged exposure to these dynamics can rewire the brain, physiologically reducing the capacity for critical thinking and emotional regulation while heightening sensations of urgency.

Admitting that there might be a touch of antisemitism in Ilhan Omar's comment that pro-Israel policies are "all about the Benjamins"

would prompt the uncomfortable reality of having participated in or endorsed prejudice disguised as social justice. It would require confronting one's cognitive dissonance, challenging ideological frameworks that have provided a sense of moral clarity, and potentially withdrawing from familiar social and activist circles.

For many, the psychological cost is too high, so they double down on justifications, reframe antisemitism as mere "anti-Zionism," or dismiss Jewish concerns altogether to preserve their self-image as righteous advocates for justice.

When confronted with evidence that contradicts their beliefs — such as historical facts, Jewish experiences, or the violent actions of groups they support — they experience psychological discomfort. This discomfort is clinically referred to as cognitive dissonance.

To resolve the dissonance, individuals disengage morally, reframing their actions as justified resistance rather than prejudice. This often manifests in:

- Victim-blaming (e.g., "Zionists brought this upon themselves")
- Selective outrage (ignoring atrocities committed by other groups while obsessively condemning Israel)
- Moral inversion (portraying terrorists as freedom fighters while demonizing Jews defending themselves)

By restructuring their right-and-wrong perception, they reduce internal conflict and insulate themselves from self-reflection, making it easier to justify dehumanization and violence.

Pro-Israel college activists can also experience cognitive dissonance and moral disengagement when navigating the intense ideological climate on campus. Facing constant hostility, they may cope by downplaying or dismissing the severity of the attacks on them, convincing themselves that remaining silent is safest.

Some may rationalize disengagement by telling themselves, "It's

just rhetoric, it's not real violence," or "If I speak up, I'll only make things worse for myself." Others may lean into an us-versus-them mentality, where every critic and protester is viewed as an enemy, reinforcing an emotional rather than strategic response.

In both cases, the overwhelming social pressure compels students to reduce internal conflict between, on one hand, their commitment to standing up for themselves and Israel in a way that acknowledges the humanity of all and, on the other, the real difficulty of doing so. The psychological need for self-preservation and belonging often overrides open engagement with complexity, replacing it with silence, justification, or rigid ideological entrenchment.

Since October 7, 2023, Jewish communities have grappled with an acute sense of vulnerability marked by collective symptoms of active trauma, leaving communities trapped in heightened emotional distress and creating a mental health crisis not seen in a generation.

Part of the solution can be the techniques of psychological therapy—properly deployed. The Jewish community needs to play a leading role in proactively addressing the psychological roots of the extremism we are witnessing before rigid belief systems take hold. Simply arguing facts is not enough: People must be equipped to assess narratives critically, recognize manipulation, and resist cognitive distortions.

First, students need a robust psychological education, the most effective preventative tool. Schools and universities must prioritize media literacy, propaganda analysis, and training in psychological resilience. Students should be taught how cognitive biases shape perception, how movements use thought-stopping techniques to suppress doubt, and how moral disengagement enables harmful behaviors. And instead of reinforcing ideological conformity, institutions need to protect open discourse, encouraging students to question and engage critically without fear of ostracization.

Second, in the middle of conflict, trauma-informed processing sessions provide a structured, nonconfrontational way to help individuals reassess their beliefs without feeling attacked. The process begins by validating the individual's emotional experience, then gradually

introduces gentle questioning to help him recognize inconsistencies in his thinking. Rather than confrontation, trained facilitators use Socratic dialogue to encourage self-reflection, so that realizations emerge organically. As with therapy, the person needs to be invested in the process and the outcome as well.

Mental health interventions may sometimes be necessary to break the ideological reinforcement cycle. The difficulty of any mental health intervention is that it requires breaking the patient's mental pattern, which exists entirely inside the mind. Such interventions must therefore eliminate psychological "escape hatches" that let individuals avoid uncomfortable realizations. This includes breaking the reward cycle of groupthink by encouraging one-on-one engagement rather than large-group reinforcement, introducing complexity gradually to avoid overwhelming the individual, and promoting personal accountability over collective identity. Additionally, resilience-training—e.g., mindfulness, emotional regulation, and stress management—can help individuals recognize manipulation and confidently disengage.

While prevention is most effective, structured debriefing and other mental health interventions offer those already immersed in ideological extremism a critical path back to independent thought. Those open to this process can begin rebuilding an identity rooted in self-reflection and empowerment.

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks taught us that "the most important lesson is that our circumstances do not define us"; what truly matters is "how we respond to them." This is the foundational principle of psychotherapy, and it applies equally to what the Jewish community is experiencing both inside our minds and on the streets today. Another of psychotherapy's foundational principles: We have the power to respond in a healthy and productive way. ✳

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‘This Regime Is Naked’

A conversation with Iranian dissident
MEHDI YAHYANEJAD

FOR SAPIR’s Activism issue, Editor-in-Chief Bret Stephens sat down for an interview with Iranian-American entrepreneur and activist Mehdi Yahyanejad. Born in Iran in 1975, Yahyanejad moved to the United States to earn a Ph.D. in physics from MIT. Since then, he has created a series of technological platforms that support activism against Iran’s hardline regime. The most well-known is Balatarin, a Persian-language online forum and news-sharing platform that serves as an outlet for free expression and the exchange of ideas in Iran.

Bret Stephens: You were a child when the Islamic Revolution happened in 1979. At what point did you or your family begin to be unhappy with the regime?

Mehdi Yahyanejad: My dad was in the Iranian army during the shah. He was an army officer at the time of the revolution. He was hopeful and to some extent sympathetic with the revolutionaries. Basically, he was hoping, like the majority of the population, that it would bring freedom and prosperity and fight corruption in Iran. But very soon he found out that this was not true.

I asked him, "When did you learn that this revolution was not going to work?" He said, "Actually, it was the first day after the victory of the revolution, when I went to the army base. On the way there, I saw one of the officers who was known to be particularly abusive of revolutionaries or others who were arrested. He was riding on the back of a motorcycle, which was a no-no for an army officer, and he was holding Khomeini's picture in his hand. When I saw this, I realized that the worst people are going to come out on top again, and this movement is going to be taken over by such individuals." And that's exactly what happened.

Stephens: You attended the Alborz High School, the Eton or Andover of Iran. And then you studied physics at Sharif University. Give us a sense of the attitude among the intellectual elite of Iran toward the revolution when you were coming of age.

Yahyanejad: At that point, suppression in Iran was so significant that no voices other than revolutionaries of different stripes were allowed to talk. The only discussion was among different types of supporters of the revolution, and at that point, a group of people who were previously supportive of the revolution had started to deviate as a result of frictions in the government. That movement consisted of Islamic religious intellectuals; it later became a foundation for reformists.

Even watching that was eye-opening, because to some extent, the government was intolerant of even those kinds of discussions. The suppression was to the extent that we actually didn't see that much dissent openly. There was no internet, there was no satellite TV.

My only exposure was once when I went to watch a student protest, with Basij members and plainclothesmen and government members trying to suppress it. I went to watch it. I wasn't part of either side, and I saw the level of hostility that Iran's government shows to any type of dissent.

The larger protest movement started later, in 1999 and 2000. Before that, you didn't see much protest activity inside Iran, because there was just not much room to do that.

Stephens: By then, you had already left Iran to pursue your Ph.D. at MIT in Massachusetts. Who were your early role models as activists? Did you encounter them in the United States? Or were they people you were following who remained inside of Iran itself?

Yahyanejad: MIT was an amazing place. There were so many different groups, different opinions. Exposure to NPR was amazing. I think NPR gave me the fastest education ever, when I came to America. The debates that I could listen to every day were amazing.

Inside Iran, there was a very short time of maybe a year or two after Mohammad Khatami's election when newspapers were able to write more freely. That created an explosion of new ideas, new personalities, new individuals. Suddenly, because of the free press, all these intellectuals came from out of nowhere. Even for a very short time, the free press is magic. That observation had an impact on a lot of my activism later on — the fact that information access is really significant.

Stephens: You came to the United States and also encountered an Iranian exile community, most of which was horrified by the revolution, and parts of which were beginning to engage in genuine activism.

The Iranian activist community, as I have found it, is a very

The Iranian government has completely lost control over the flow of information.

fractious community. Help us understand the landscape of Iranian activism, in broad strokes, outside of Iran itself.

Yahyanejad: For 20 years, there was a gap in immigration to the United States. There were people who came in the early '80s, a lot of them basically running away from the Islamic Revolution. A large portion of them were supporters of the shah.

Then, the new generation came. They were hopeful of reform inside Iran, and a lot of them remained engaged with that movement. Later, of course, this changed.

Today, the majority wants the regime to be replaced by a secular democracy that coexists in peace with its neighbors and the West. There are also others who are nostalgic about the era of social freedom and economic prosperity under the Pahlavi kings (1921–1979); they are interested in the return of a secular monarchy.

But the majority of Iranians are without representation. They haven't been able to organize well. There are a number of what I call "celebrity dissidents" who are well-known in the media. But they don't represent any political party or organized group of people. Most of the activism against the Iranian government comes about through individual initiatives or small NGOs scattered throughout Europe and North America.

The main reason it's fractured has been a successful campaign of character assassinations by the Iranian government. This has kept mistrust very high among Iranian activists outside Iran and prevented them from forming larger political movements.

Stephens: Since the Green Movement in 2009, and then protests in 2018–2019, and of course the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in 2022, much of the world has become aware of the activist community inside Iran. To what extent is that activist community in tune with the activist community outside?

Yahyanejad: There's a fair amount of connection on an individual basis. For a long time, I was part of a weekly meeting with key activists inside and outside Iran to coordinate efforts. It's very difficult to organize inside the country. The cost is high, and people end up in prison. Even messages from our meetings were captured by the Iranian government, and activists inside Iran paid a price.

It's a difficult thing to do, but it's still happening, in large part because of secure chat messaging systems that have made it feasible. What we haven't been able to crack yet is how to scale those relationships and mobilize people. We need to build connections between cities outside Iran and cities inside Iran, between activists who are in different locations. Let's connect them, so people who are outside Iran can facilitate and deliver all sorts of support — from VPNs and Starlink, to small cash transfers to help take action or to pay their bills if they are unemployed because of their activities, and so on.

We need to leverage technology to facilitate this. The Bernie Sanders campaign did this successfully in 2016. Nobody expected him to be a viable presidential candidate. He was a fringe politician, even in the Democratic Party. But with a very small team, he succeeded in organizing and mobilizing close to 100,000 volunteers back in 2016, and he put up a good fight during the primaries. There is a book on this titled *Rules for Revolutionaries*, on how big organizing can change everything. It covers how they used online workflows to get these 100,000 volunteers to call millions of people across America and set up meetups all across the country. I believe a similar approach — possibly made even stronger with the use of AI — would be successful in Iran.

Stephens: Give us a sense of the penetration of outside networks that allow activists to bring news into Iran and get messages across. Is this happening on a large scale? When you talk about the Bernie campaign, he was operating in a land with 330 million or more internet connections. There was absolute freedom of access. Just how large of an audience is there in Iran that is hungry for outside information, for samizdat?

Yahyanejad: The Iranian government has completely lost control over the flow of information. This is a big distinguishing factor between Iran and China, North Korea, and Russia. In those countries, the government has successfully kept control over the media, over content generation inside the country. In Iran, people from outside can reach the masses through satellite TVs, Instagram, Facebook, and so on.

This actually caught Iran by surprise back in 2009 with the Green Movement, because social media was the key factor that fostered this mass mistrust of the government. Afterward, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps said, *This time, we were caught by surprise, by Facebook, Twitter and Balatarin, but we are not going to be caught by surprise next time.*

They took actions to remedy their deficiency. But in terms of mass communications, I think the dissidents and opposition still have the advantage. Where we don't have the advantage is on the individual level: connections, network building, coordination, and taking action inside Iran. What's happening is very sporadic and unorganized. And you see the result anytime anybody from outside Iran puts up a statement asking people to protest inside Iran. Nobody listens. In Iran, none of the opposition parties has been successful in organizing a protest that even 10 people will show up to.

Stephens: Let me ask about your own activism. First, explain to me what exactly you're doing. And second, how do you measure its effect?

Iranians during the ’80s, during the Iran–Iraq War, suffered much more economic hardship than today, but a great portion of them believed in government ideology, government propaganda, and so on. That has totally changed.

Yahyanejad: Back in 2006, I started a social-media website called Balatarin. It’s similar to Reddit, but focused mainly on politics and social issues. It became popular in Iran very quickly, in part because of a mistake made by the Iranian government. They accused the website of being funded by Israel, which was totally false. Six months before the Green Movement, in December 2008 and January 2009, during a war in Gaza, the government wasn’t happy about anti-Hamas content that was posted on Balatarin. They organized a hacking campaign against us, and took the website down for a couple of days. That increased our popularity among Iranians once we came back, and Balatarin became a hub for activism during the Green Movement later that year.

Balatarin helped all these individuals who were dissatisfied with the Iranian government. Many of them didn’t actually realize that they were not alone, that there were many others who believed in the same thing. They found one another on Balatarin, and their voices became stronger and were amplified. The website was effective in helping people move from believing in a reformist movement to a more revolutionary mindset.

The fact that you see much dissatisfaction today with the regime inside Iran is because the people’s mindset has changed.

Iranians during the '80s, during the Iran–Iraq War, suffered much more economic hardship than today, but a great portion of them believed in government ideology, government propaganda, and so on. That has totally changed. And that's where you see the impact of Balatarin and other social-media platforms.

This dissatisfaction affects Iranian foreign policy. The Iranian government didn't take aggressive action in Syria during the fall of Assad, for example. To justify their inaction to their own supporters, they said they didn't have the full support of Iranian people. If the Iranian people's mindset had been where it was 30 years ago, where it was 20 years ago, the government would have made a different decision, even if it meant sacrificing 100,000 Iranians. So all these things, even though they haven't resulted in regime change, they have an impact. They've limited the government's aggressive actions outside Iran.

Stephens: Imagine a philanthropist. For humanitarian reasons, he's distressed by the plight of the Iranian people, and for strategic reasons, he's fearful of what Iran does. He wants to help activists in or outside of Iran do more of what they have been doing and do it more effectively.

What would you say to that philanthropist? What would you urge him to support and, at the same time, what would you tell him not to do?

Yahyanejad: First look back to history: Iran's situation is similar to Soviet Eastern Europe. A dissatisfied population, a revolutionary regime that belongs to history, and so on. What do we need to do? We need to increase people's solidarity inside Iran.

One idea is to go back to the existing networks inside Iran. There are a lot of guilds and unions and professional networks. Let's empower them. We could create corresponding guilds outside Iran, in the exile community, tasked with supporting those networks inside Iran. This is how Polish solidarity worked. This

is how Charter 77, to some extent, in Czechoslovakia worked.

We need to bring together these networks that already exist in Iran and support their work by connecting them to corresponding international organizations, giving them Starlink terminals, buying them VPNs, and helping them to set up their websites securely outside Iran. The cost of political activity is lower for these networks, because they already exist.

Empowering these networks can change the dynamic and introduce new activist leaders inside Iran, bringing them to the mainstream media and social media. Once we reach 1,000 figures who are well-known inside and outside Iran, the Iranian government is not going to be able to arrest or crack down on all of them.

I also believe that we need to use AI to automate social organizing and mobilization inside Iran. We should be able to suggest to every single person inside Iran what action to take. The action needs to be low-cost. We can build something that will catch the government totally by surprise. This would be the first AI-assisted revolution, utilizing all these new communication tools. We need a small group of coordinators outside the country to use the technology, use workflows, and mobilize a large number of people inside Iran by telling them exactly what to do. This can unleash a massive civil disobedience action in Iran.

Stephens: The *Washington Post* has reported in the past few months about the ways in which Iran is sending criminal intermediaries to threaten or assault or even attempt to kill some of their critics, usually people of Iranian descent living in the West. It has happened, of course, with Masih Alinejad. That case has been widely reported. The Iranians also seem to have developed a network of soft fellow travelers who aren't exactly pro-regime, but are active in making excuses for the regime or trying to shape Western policy in a manner that is more hostile to the activist community and more sympathetic to the regime itself. How effective are those

> We need to bring together these networks that already exist in Iran and support their work by connecting them to corresponding international organizations, giving them Starlink terminals, buying them VPNs.

efforts in silencing activists or marginalizing activists, and how do you contend with them?

Yahyanejad: The Iranian regime's influence network has to a large extent been neutralized on social media in recent years. Their messaging to advance the Iranian regime's agenda failed.

In response, the government has launched a new generation of offensive methods. It consists of individuals who pretend to be dissidents, but who launch character attacks against other dissidents and attacks against NGOs. We still don't have a good response to these new types of attacks. I think part of the answer should come from the dissident community. We need to have basic ethical guidelines. We need to reject those who are pretending to be dissidents or pretending to be in opposition, but whose only job is attacking other opposition groups.

Stephens: About 20 years ago, I heard Bernard Lewis, the well-known, late historian of the Middle East, argue against military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. The line he used is that such an attack would give the ayatollahs or the mullahs the benefit of Iranian patriotism. That is to say, he feared that an attack by Israel or the United States or both would actually do more to help the

regime than to hurt it in the long term, by uniting Iranians in a nationalistic way around their government. Is that true? Would that be true today in your estimation?

Yahyanejad: There are a lot of ifs. From what I read on social media, people are worried that other infrastructure will be damaged by a strike. The Iranians don't care about the nuclear issue. But they already deal with electricity and water shortages.

They don't want to end up in the Iraq of the '90s, where infrastructure was destroyed while the regime was left in place. Iranians want this regime to end. If somebody puts forward a solution that leads to the end of the regime, even if it's aggressive, I think a lot of people would support it. But if the solution doesn't have a clear end, and might put them in a position like that of Iraq in the '90s where Iraq was bombed and sanctioned but Saddam was still left in place? They're not going to be in favor of it.

Stephens: Another thing Bernard Lewis gave me was a prediction: In a few years, Iran would be once again like Turkey was in the 1990s or Iran was in the 1960s and '70s, an ally of the West with diplomatic relations with Israel, and Turkey would be where Iran is today, an Islamist regime, albeit a Sunni one, very hostile to the interests of the West.

Now, let's put Turkey to one side. If you were to make a bet, do you see Iran's regime in power in five or 10 years? Or do you think that we are like Romania in the 1980s—very close to the end of the line?

Yahyanejad: I think we are close to the end of the revolutionary regime. How it's going to crumble, it's hard to say. Will it happen suddenly? How violent will the ending be? Will a new secular republic emerge from it?

In terms of what we know: Opposition to the regime is high. Their ideology has failed, their control of the media is gone, and

the only thing they have left is a small number of supporters and their security forces. That's a bad place to be in. This wasn't the case 20 years ago, 10 years ago, when they had a fair amount of soft power and a lot of people were still hopeful about reform inside the regime. That has all changed. This regime is naked. The only thing that's left are their tanks and their weapons, and those things don't protect a regime for too long. ✳

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TOBA HELLERSTEIN

Actually, Feelings Don't Care About Your Facts

Reimagining the case for Israel

OU DON'T bring facts to a feelings fight."

This has become a common critique of even the most well-intentioned Israel activism, with its reliance on historical facts and its tendency to overintellectualize rather than make emotional appeals. This insight, while true, suffers from the opposite shortcoming: oversimplification.

In fact, Israel activism often involves a lot of feelings. The problem is that they are communicated ineffectively. Having spent the past year and a half conducting a comprehensive qualitative study about attitudes toward Jews and Israel, including interviews, ethnographic research, and focus groups within white, Latino, and black demographics, I have learned some surprising truths about what might move the needle in dispelling antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiment.

What emerged from my research — recently published under the title *American Perceptions of Jews & Israel: Narratives of Antisemitism, Insights & Strategies for Change* — wasn't just a window into the audience, but a mirror for understanding the Jewish world as well. In that reflection, two modes of Israel activism came into view: the informational and the critical. Although these are not the only modes of Israel activism, they are both quite common and, as well-intentioned as they might be, both have a way of quietly undermining their goals.

The problem

At the heart of Israel activism lies a central question: Who is Israel activism really for? Are its messages thoughtfully crafted to reach the average American — someone with little background in Jewish history, Israel, or the conflict? Or is it unintentionally inward-facing, offering affirmation and catharsis to those already convinced? If activists knew how their messages landed with people who haven't lived the same history or who have been shaped by completely different ones, they might rethink the instinct to educate through correction and to respond to ignorance with criticism and shame.

Let's begin with activists who work in the informational mode. One of the most urgent challenges in pro-Israel activism today is dismantling the propaganda narrative that vilifies Israel and thereby makes it seem reasonable to call for the country's elimination. To this fight, the informational activists come armed with argumentation, data, and moral outrage, believing that their emotionally resonant facts — definitions of antisemitism and Zionism or reminders of Israel's repeated attempts at compromise with the Palestinians and the frustrating failures on the part of Palestinian leadership to achieve such compromises. The informational activists believe that all this will cut through the distortions.

These facts carry deep emotional weight within the Jewish community because they are interwoven with shared history,

collective memory, and inherited language that stir a powerful internal response. But the informational activist mistakes the emotion she feels when relaying the facts for the emotion she is generating in the listener. For most Americans—who lack that cultural and historical context—such messaging lands as cold lecturing. You cannot reason someone out of a stance he didn't reason himself into. This is what I call "the illusion of emotional expression."

The only communication style arguably less persuasive than emotional flatness is its opposite: aggression. The critical activists—prevalent on social media and the television debate circuit—employ shame, combativeness, and sometimes a dash of theatrical hysteria when pointing out the hypocrisies and logical inconsistencies of the other side. Needless to say, there is no lack of emotion here, but the emotional charge does not translate into persuasive argumentation. Notably, though, that doesn't seem to be the point. An even cursory look at some of these high-profile activists and their platforms suggests that the intended audience are those who are already pro-Israel. Moral outrage may soothe the advocate's sense of righteousness, but it rarely persuades the undecided. What feels sacred and urgent to Jews often sounds opaque, moralizing, or even patronizing to those outside the fold.

The psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Nonviolent Communication framework, draws a crucial distinction: There is a difference between emotional honesty and emotional impact. If the informational activists suffer from the illusion of emotional expression, conflating their own emotions with those they are trying to evoke, critical activists make a similar mistake on the opposite side of the coin, mistaking their emotional honesty for emotional impact. The intensity of moral outrage often backfires. It can trigger defensiveness, reinforce bias, and widen the gap.

This reveals what both modes of Israel activism have most in common: They are more accurately understood as acts of catharsis than of persuasion.

The informational and critical modes of Israel activism are just

> If the goal is to illuminate who Israelis are, and why they act as they do, activists must anchor storytelling of Israel in what Americans already value about Jews, in ways that reveal Israel's moral purpose and posture.

opposite methods of catharsis, alternative outlets for emotional release. Whether activists are speaking from a position of performative distance and factual objectivity, or from a place of smug moral superiority or raw grief, their subconscious priority is to serve their own emotional needs rather than to foster a connection with their audience.

My research confirms this. When asked about their impressions of Israelis and Israeli activists, Americans said they perceived them as "cold," "entitled," and "uncaring." It is neither the facts nor the feelings that are missing from Israel activism. What it requires, more than emotional intensity, is emotional attunement. Without such attunement, even the most factually airtight and morally impassioned argument fails to persuade. As one of my focus group participants said, "It's hard to be like, correct or not — it's more like framing. It's not necessarily facts; propaganda is more like tone. Pushing you." Another added, "The tone and facial expressions — that's how you know if it's legit."

A new way

What the insight of emotional attunement calls for is a shift in focus: away from what the activist feels compelled to express,

and toward what the audience needs to hear. The key to identifying that also requires a shift away from the "what" entirely and toward the "who."

So, who is Israel? Most Americans really have no idea. They do, however, hold certain notions and impressions of Jews. When asked to rank the positive qualities they associate with Jews, Americans rarely cite achievements or what Jews have brought to the world. They often cite deeply human qualities that evoke emotion rather than debate: strong family values, hard work, humor, and resilience. If the goal is to illuminate who Israelis are, and why they act as they do, activists must anchor storytelling of Israel in what Americans already value about Jews, in ways that reveal Israel's moral purpose and posture.

I've seen this come up in unexpected ways in my research. One participant in my study captured this truth with striking clarity, in language that required no background or briefing: "Israel be like, 'You slapped my momma, I'm gonna f*** you up.' And it's like, he's actin' all crazy like, 'Whoa dude, calm down.' But also, I get it — you shouldn't smack his momma." Another voiced this kind of emotional truth in a way that clearly echoed across the room with the other participants: "Israel be like, 'Yo, if you got 100 of my people and you're talkin' about signing some peace treaty — no way. I'm getting my people back. You wanna be hard-headed? I guess we'll be hard-headed together.'"

The emotional attunement here is in the participants' recognition of the familial, the who rather than the what. The instinct to protect one's own is universal, whereas fights over the definition of Zionism or what is and is not antisemitism, while sacred to Jews, are meaningless or even alienating to most Americans.

One of the most compelling defenses of Zionism I heard in my study never used the word at all. A participant reflected on Jews' desire to safeguard their own nation: "It's people fighting for their spot, man. Fighting to live and be able to be free. That's what everybody wants."

Another added: "Everyone has a dream, and they're going to achieve that."

This is the crux: storytelling rooted in universal human experience. Language that doesn't need translation. The pro-Israel community must stop dying on the hill of terminology.

Instead of *antisemitism*, talk about exclusion, fear, and erasure.

Instead of *Zionism*, talk about belonging, safety, and freedom.

Israel activism's fixation on vocabulary is the dry result of its lack of emotional attunement. This becomes even more problematic in times of war when people's screens are flooded with images of tanks, airstrikes, and hungry families.

The pro-Israel instinct is often to explain, to correct, to justify these images. But that impulse misses the heart of persuasion. It's not about *what* Israel does; it's about *who* Israelis are and what they're fighting for, and that story centers on the values Americans identify with Jews and Judaism.The goal isn't to soften the truth of war's many horrors. It's to replace abstraction with humanity and common values.

This is where the anti-Israel movement excels, and how it has managed to mobilize a sweeping coalition despite the fact that most of its supporters know little about Palestinians, their history, or that of the region. Instead, they have tapped into America's cultural psyche. Take the phrase "Free Palestine." It strikes a chord not because of historical accuracy, but because it taps into a core American value—freedom. It sounds instinctively right, morally urgent, and emotionally clear. Its power lies in how it feels, and it feels a lot like "Free Tibet." Have you ever met an American who takes issue with that?

By contrast, "Stand with Israel" feels static, tribal, and closed. It draws a line instead of opening a door. It demands allegiance, but it doesn't invite or inspire it. The anti-Israel movement's emotional attunement has allowed it to capitalize on the vagaries of American popular sentiment, always tapping into what Americans are feeling. When America grapples with racism, Israel is a white country

Hamas is the anti-hero — rebellious, defiant, fighting for justice by any means necessary. In a society disillusioned with institutions, this archetype resonates even more.

oppressing a brown minority — despite its blurring of ethnic and racial categories. When Americans lose faith in institutions, Israel is made to represent the establishment. Anti-Israel activists don't fight history; they mirror emotion. They meet America where it is and match its vibe.

Israel, the flawed hero

In the effort to develop emotional attunement, there is at least one arena where Israel is at a distinct disadvantage, and that is the role it plays on the world stage. The human mind instinctively sorts groups and countries into archetypes — symbolic roles that help us make sense of who is powerful, who is vulnerable, and who deserves our empathy. Archetypes are a powerful emotional shorthand, and in geopolitics, Israel is often cast in the archetype of the ruler, or king. While this archetype serves Israel well in boardrooms and war rooms, securing defense alliances and major investments, the archetype has an Achilles' heel. When a king falters, he doesn't merely stumble, he falls. Strength curdles into oppression. Power becomes cruelty. Leadership becomes tyranny.

The king's battle dress exudes protectiveness, steadfastness, and control, but offers no warmth. It doesn't invite connection and understanding — it deflects it. It inspires obedience, not empathy.

And in its long shadow, the Israeli people are no longer seen as human beings with fears, families, and dreams. They dissolve into abstraction. In this perception, Israel is not a people but a regime: cold, domineering, and emotionally inaccessible.

So when propaganda fuels rage against Israel, that fury doesn't stay confined to Israel the government or Israel the military. It overtakes all of Israel, the nation, the society, the people.

This is where the anti-Israel movement seizes its advantage. Through its messaging, alliances, and imagery it has constructed a dual-archetype identity, that of the innocent victim/anti-hero. This simultaneously humanizes the Palestinian national movement as a whole and justifies or excuses the violence it inflicts.

The primary archetype is that of the innocent victim: powerless, suffering, virtuous. With this archetype, the Palestinian national movement again finds resonance in the American psyche and its deep affinity for the underdog. America's self-conception, after all, casts itself in this role vis-à-vis the British — wait for it — king.

But the archetype translates into something more powerful when it comes to Hamas, who is cast as the savior of the innocent victims. Hamas is the anti-hero — rebellious, defiant, fighting for justice by any means necessary. In a society disillusioned with institutions, this archetype resonates even more. Think of Joaquin Phoenix's Joker in the 2019 movie. Here, vengeance is valor. At worst, violent excesses can be viewed as lamentable missteps on the road to restitution. The Palestinian cause has become a vessel for American cultural emotion, a canvas onto which many identity groups project their own struggles against power and oppression.

Archetypes don't just shape perception, they filter it. Once someone sees a group as the innocent victim or the anti-hero, and their enemy as a king, reality can be easily narrated to fit into that dynamic. New facts don't change the frame; they become absorbed into it. It is why, as the research illustrates, exposing Hamas atrocities often fails to sway those already sympathetic to

the Palestinian cause. For those drawn to the anti-hero archetype, the violence doesn't disqualify the story; it reinforces it.

Israel's goal, and that of its global supporters, in this context of communications should be to shift its archetype from that of the king to one that is in fact more accurate: the flawed hero.

Like the anti-hero, the flawed hero lives at the heart of the American imagination. Americans don't fall in love with the perfect as much as they fall for the brave. The brave are not fearless; they overcome their fears and shortcomings. The great figures of America's various superhero universes fit this archetype well. It's Batman battling villains as well as inner demons. It's Iron Man simultaneously fighting the corrupt and his own alcoholism.

The flawed hero is noble but imperfect — resilient, relentless, and possessed of a deeply humane purpose. In addition to being an archetype that resonates powerfully in today's cultural climate, the flawed hero has character traits that line up nicely with what Americans admire about the Jewish community.

In an era shaped by disillusionment and distrust of institutions, portraying Israel as flawless doesn't build trust. It erodes it. Connecting with Millennials and Gen Z, who now sit at the emotional center of anti-Israel messaging from the Right and the Left, means adopting this new archetype.

One participant in my study captured that flavor of truth in a single, unforgettable line — spoken not in defense of Israel's policies, but in admiration of its people:

"They're gonna ride or die."

That's not the language of geopolitics. It's the language of personal devotion. It is not the language of perfection, but of connection; connection begins where perfection ends. This is the soul of the flawed hero. It's the difference between the declarative statement,

"No country would tolerate rockets being fired at its civilians" and the statement of devotion: "It's terrifying to live under constant rocket fire. All we know—deep in our bones—is that we have to keep our children safe."

The flawed hero breaks the trance of the propaganda, which assigns cruelty and indifference to Israel's actions. It reframes them as what they often are: messy, imperfect acts of fierce protection and painful necessity.

This is the heart of Israel. This is not *what* but *who* Israel is. ✳

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PART THREE

HOW TO BE A JEWISH ACTIVIST AFTER OCTOBER 7

DAVID HAZONY

Allies

What the Jews can learn from the Druze

FEW EVENTS should be as uncontroversial in today's Jewish world as a major international conference on antisemitism in Jerusalem. Such a gathering was held this past March, hosted by Israel's Minister of Diaspora Affairs Amichai Chikli and featuring speakers such as President Isaac Herzog and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The conference's aim was to bring together leading thinkers and policymakers from around the world to address the gravest crisis in Jewish life since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Before the conference, however, it emerged that among the dozens of high-profile speakers on the roster, several were far-right politicians from Europe—most notably Jordan Bardella, successor to Marine Le Pen as leader of France's National Rally party.

Major Jewish speakers pulled out, including the French thinker Bernard-Henri Lévy, the renowned British antisemitism scholar David Hirsh, and the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom Ephraim Mirvis. Jonathan Greenblatt, head of the Anti-Defamation League, canceled as well, after the organization's legendary former chief, Abe Foxman, blasted the conference for legitimizing "authoritarian neo-fascist political parties." Other major figures skipped the main event and instead spoke at a smaller, invitation-only event at the President's Residence the night before.

How did this happen? The obvious problem was that conference organizers failed to consult key Diaspora figures, especially in Europe, before adding the controversial politicians. An event meant to show unity was conspicuously bungled.

Beyond the drama, something more profound was revealed: There is, it turns out, a fundamental divide over how Jews should build alliances in a post–October 7 world.

On one side are those who believe that Jews should partner with people who share our political and social values — liberal-democratic pillars such as equality, rights, and freedom — to ensure that long-term battles for the strength of democracy are not sacrificed for short-term gain in fighting progressive and Islamist antisemites.

On the other are those who look for allies wherever we may find them. Anyone who joins the current fight against antisemites is welcome, regardless of the person's positions on immigration, nationalism, or democracy.

David Hirsh's public statement explaining his cancellation offers a sense of how profound this divide really is:

> There are too many far-right speakers on the agenda who associate themselves with anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian movements. . . . It is clear to me that anti-democratic thinking is fertile ground for antisemitism and that the best way to undermine antisemitism is to support democratic thinking, movements and states. . . .

> In an increasingly hostile world, the State of Israel is hungry for allies, but it must be disciplined in keeping some distance from those who do not share its values. Israel could listen more attentively to the advice of local Jewish communities and it should not offer the populist right, which has fascistic antisemitism in its heritage and amongst its support, an official Jewish stamp of approval.

I've met David Hirsh. He is one of the most important scholars of antisemitism alive, committed in his bones to fighting the good fight, and a mensch to boot. But here I am forced to disagree.

As for the conference, I cannot say whether these speakers should have been invited. I certainly do not dismiss the reactions of esteemed European Jews like Hirsh and Lévy—both of whom I admire. If I were minister of Diaspora affairs, I would have spoken with them well in advance of the conference to solicit genuine counsel. Perhaps a compromise could have been reached.

But with respect to the deeper divide, I would suggest that the approach reflected in Hirsh's statement may no longer be viable, while that of the conference organizers—regardless of how they handled it in practice—is not just legitimate but an existential necessity.

As it happens, the same fault line appeared among American Jews at around the same time, over the arrest of Mahmoud Khalil, a leader of the Hamas-supporting student group Columbia University Apartheid Divest. Khalil had his green card revoked for his involvement in the campus protests and, as of this writing, awaits legal resolution in a detention center in Louisiana. While many Jews celebrated, others wrote op-eds and social-media posts to the effect that while Khalil was clearly an antisemitic scumbag, Jews should not rejoice at the ease with which America was deporting him, citing the potentially ill effects of such actions on free speech, a pillar of both American freedom and Jewish survival.

In the wake of October 7, when Jews around the world find themselves in the thick of an existential battle, arguments of this type no longer seem to make sense. True, we should never partner with

> When equality gave way to 'equity' and prejudice gave way to 'privilege' in the progressive vocabulary, that's when Jews became 'oppressors' rather than just another minority.

outright antisemites, Left or Right. But we should no longer impose broader litmus tests on allyship. We should no longer, to use Hirsh's formulation, "keep some distance from those who do not share our values." We have tried this. It has failed us.

Instead, we should ally with whoever helps us win.

The patterns of Jewish alliance-building in the United States were forged more than a century ago. Progressive American Jews, backed by the majority of the Jewish community, led the charge in building alliances to bring about a less chauvinistic America. Jews were at the forefront when the equal rights of minorities, women, and gay people were enshrined in law.

And indeed, Jews benefited. America became a less tolerant place for antisemites just as it did for racists, sexists, and homophobes. The Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s directly affected Jews, offering them almost limitless equality of opportunity for the first time. Gone were signs saying "No Jews Allowed" or legally sanctioned exclusion from elite spaces. Only then did the engines of Jewish-American prosperity really fire up.

This last point is crucial, for the entire project of American-Jewish liberalism made sense only because it also helped Jews. The almost complete overlap between our fight for universal equality and the

interests of Jewish survival was central to Jewish political action.

Over time, however, American Jews increasingly came to believe that the altruistic, universalistic purpose was the *only* genuinely Jewish basis of the fight. To speak of "Jewish interests" (or to use the expression "good for the Jews") became unseemly and antiquated. It went out of style and took some truth with it.

But to keep something quiet for too long is to risk forgetting it entirely—which is exactly what happened when, more than a decade ago, progressive causes began excluding Jews from the benefits that Jews were fighting for. As Anthony Berteaux wrote in a prescient 2016 essay called "In the Safe Spaces on American Campuses, No Jews Allowed," Jews in the most progressive colleges found themselves left out:

> Little has been said about how the idea of "intersectionality"—the idea that all struggles are connected and must be combatted by allies—has created a dubious bond between the progressive movement and pro-Palestinian activists who often engage in the same racist and discriminatory discourse they claim to fight. As a result of this alliance, progressive Jewish students are often subjected to a double standard not applied to their peers—an Israel litmus test to prove their loyalties to social justice.

The problem grew more acute as progressivism continued to evolve. When equality gave way to "equity" and prejudice gave way to "privilege" in the progressive vocabulary, that's when Jews became "oppressors" rather than just another minority. Equal opportunity was abandoned in favor of retribution ("justice") against structures of power and the groups that, in the progressive view, benefited from them.

As a result, the progressive alliance no longer included a fight against antisemitism. Jews were suddenly, categorically, among those who *caused* injustice.

For many Jews, cognitive dissonance took hold. They fell back

on multigenerational certainties: that the "real" enemies were right-wing antisemites and anyone who gave them oxygen; that the true battle lines for American Jews were pro- vs. anti-democratic forces, which is to say Left vs. Right; that progressive antisemitism was really just "opposing Israeli policies," the same way that many American Jews also opposed them; that "from the river to the sea" was a slogan of hope rather than a genocidal chant.

It took October 7 and its aftermath for more American Jews to realize that a great many of their allies were actually enemies—or, at best, fair-weather friends. Suddenly the network of alliances Jews had built with immense investment over generations—feminists, African Americans, LGBT, labor unions—evaporated at precisely the moment Jews needed it most.

Everyone now knows that these alliances failed. But I'm arguing something else: It was also the very idea of allyship that had animated Jewish public life for a century that had failed. It must now be reconsidered.

For nations, allyship grounded in shared values rather than cold interests is, at best, a peacetime luxury. Countries separated greatly from war by time and geography often feel free to choose their allies according to taste. But for those facing military threats on their doorstep, passing up on powerful allies because they don't share your values can be a form of suicide.

In an essay called "The War Against the Jews," which appeared in these pages soon after October 7, I argued that a global war against the Jewish people had been launched, and that the Diaspora would need to move to a war footing. This meant a more sober approach to survival, dictated by neither fear nor rage, but rather by borrowing from the vocabulary of wartime generals—objectives, tactics, resources, communications, deterrence, and so on.

What has happened since then on campuses, on urban streets,

and in American politics has, I fear, only made this argument more urgent. Nowhere is it needed more than in rethinking allyship.

It is true that radical political movements will often hide their real aims behind a curtain of friendly-sounding words. We no longer can team up with people who deny the crimes of October 7 or downplay antisemitic violence just because they wave the banner of progress — just as we shouldn't work with antisemitic conspiracy theorists who fight the progressive-Islamist alliance.

At the same time, we should no longer reflexively distance ourselves from powerful potential allies on the other side, just because they disagree with us on policies we identify as democratic.

I wish for the democratic dream to prevail. But our people lived for many centuries before democracy, and we will, if it ever comes to that, continue living for many centuries after it. We have certainly thrived under liberal-democratic rule and must support it wherever doing so is practicable. But we also exist outside of it, beyond it; our existential interests transcend it. Especially now.

We have long grown used to the realpolitik of nations. We may find it distasteful, for example, that the United States shares a bed with the likes of Saudi Arabia. But Americans on both sides of the political aisle have learned to accept and benefit from it.

Israel, too, has long worked with questionable regimes. The Abraham Accords were essentially a kind of alliance with anti-democracies. Israel allies with Azerbaijan — a Shia Muslim–majority nation not known for its democratic guardrails — because of a common interest in combating Iran. Israel allied with Iran under the shah, and with Turkey in its more secular authoritarian phase.

The most extreme example in modern history, perhaps, is the World War II alliance between the United States under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the USSR under Josef Stalin — an alliance that defeated the Nazis and created the postwar order.

Roosevelt and Stalin, of course, shared no values at all.

We generally do not look back at that alliance as a colossal moral failure on Roosevelt's part. Germany and Japan posed an

existential threat to America. When, after the war, the conditions that precipitated the alliance no longer existed, both sides moved on — and the Cold War began.

At the geopolitical level, wartime allyship, it turns out, isn't friendship. It's not about two nations embarking on a journey of transcendent value. It's more like business. Alliances are built to meet the challenge of the day and to secure victory.

The greatest challenge facing the Jews today is a vast antisemitic enemy emerging from the Islamist Middle East, with its missiles and suicidal killers, and spreading across oceans and continents into deeply funded NGOs, international bodies, university faculty, media, protests, and political movements. Our mission today is to build alliances that maximize our ability to fight this war.

When our threat landscape shifts, we will shift our alliances accordingly. In war, you do what you have to.

How are the Jews — who will always be a tiny minority in the Diaspora — to apply this approach? One model worth looking at is that of the Druze.

The Druze are an Arabic-speaking, monotheistic sect that spun off from Islam. They live today in towns across Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. They are both religiously and culturally alien to the Jews of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Their values are not our values. Yet like the Jewish Diaspora, they are a small minority in every country.

The Druze approach to allyship is simple: They will partner with whatever regime defends their villages. Protecting their land and religion is the only thing that matters. And they know how to fight. Over generations, Israeli Druze have built a stable, mutually beneficial relationship with the Jewish state. They proudly serve in the IDF and hoist Israel's flag.

It didn't matter that their cousins, the Druze of Syria, hoisted the Syrian flag — and until recently, supported the regime of Bashar

al-Assad. The moment IDF forces entered Syria after Assad's fall last December and then provided a protective umbrella to the Druze community, the Syrian Druze became our friends.

This didn't make them unreliable in Israeli eyes; on the contrary, it was fully consistent with their well-known principles. Neither did it create a sense of intractable division among the Druze themselves. Israeli Druze welcomed a delegation of Syrian Druze religious leaders to Israel this March with open arms.

What makes it work is this: Their principles are clear and on the table. The Druze will support whoever protects their interests. They do not confuse allyship with the essence of their mission.

Jews in the Diaspora should offer potential allies a similar bargain: We will fight, fiercely and loyally, alongside whoever protects our people. We will not judge their religious, political, or social views. We will not "keep some distance" from those who do not "share our values."

Just as we should not paint the entire American or European Left as antisemitic just because there are antisemites in their midst, neither should we do so with the American or European Right. I do not believe that President Trump, for all his flaws, is an antisemite, and I think his support for Israel, expulsion of antisemitic activists, and punishing of colleges that enable antisemitism, should be sufficient proof. For American Jews to refuse to work with any party that, as Hirsh put it, has "antisemitism in its heritage and amongst its supporters" is to cut ourselves off from not only Republicans but also Democrats.

Instead of abandoning the field, we should join the internal battles within political camps to keep them onside. If Republicans find themselves in league electorally with right-wing antisemites in order to defeat the Democrats, we should be there to show why we're more valuable than Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens. And the same is true on the Left: Rather than ditch the Democratic Party because of Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, we should work with our allies in it, such as Ritchie

Torres and John Fetterman, to demonstrate our greater value to their own cause.

Like the Druze, we could do worse than being known as a people who will fight ferociously for our interests and join with anyone who will defend them.

As Jews, we will never give up our universal values. They are part of the Jewish mission on earth.

But we should not allow them to obscure our existential interest, either. Our true enemies will always be the antisemites, whether Left or Right. We should ally with those who side with us against them, with little regard for their reasons or ultimate goals. Because "ultimate goals" are a faraway thing, and the antisemites are here now.

Many Jews will defend their adherence to a pre–October 7, values-based approach by suggesting that the longer-term battle against anti-democratic forces must be fought today, even at the expense of defeating the progressive-Islamist alliance.

This is a mistake. By fighting tomorrow's war at the expense of today's, we don't just undermine our power to win today's. We also risk losing a great deal of what we will need to fight tomorrow's. This may seem counterintuitive, so I will explain it through analogy, again, to Israel's wars.

In the past year, Israel has dramatically weakened Iran by decimating its proxies in Lebanon and Gaza, triggering the collapse of Assad in Syria, and destroying Iran's own air defenses. But Iran is not defeated. If Israel takes its eyes off the Iranian ball (today's war) because of worry, for example, about rising Turkish influence in the region (potentially tomorrow's war), it risks failing to defeat Tehran and allowing it to come roaring back. Iran can tomorrow break out to a nuclear weapon, wait for a more favorable administration in Washington, and once again menace Israel on its borders, but this time with a nuclear umbrella.

The result of this would not just be a rejuvenated enemy to the east; it would also mean a significant loss of deterrence against Turkey or any other "enemies of tomorrow." Israel would be perceived as lacking the will or ability to win, and its enemies would be emboldened and multiply. Victory and defeat, it turns out, affect the calculations not just of the current enemy but of all future enemies.

Similarly, if Diaspora Jewry successfully defeats its enemies today by maximizing alliances with pro-Israel and anti-antisemitic forces on both Left and Right, and the result is the evisceration of progressive antisemitism from elite universities, the media, and legitimate politics, then Jews will not simply enjoy the fruits of equal access to institutions and the ability to attend Columbia or stroll through London without fear. They will have become a stronger force in the world, both in perception and reality—and therefore in a much better position, in terms of resources, willing allies, and deterrence, to battle antisemites on the Right tomorrow.

If we lose this battle, however, by refusing to join with those who could have helped us just because they didn't "share our values," we will have fewer friends on the Right willing to help us in tomorrow's war, while those on the Left will view us as a less useful ally. Across the spectrum, people will see comparably more benefit in opposing us than joining us.

All of this is obvious to anyone who studies geopolitics, but it has yet to be taken seriously in the strategic thinking of the organized Jewish Diaspora. Like Israelis before October 7, American Jews have not faced an existential threat in a long time.

For too long, we have lived under the belief that the best allies are those who share our social and political beliefs. We have confused our universal values with our interests as a people. We see someone who has objectionable views, say, on immigration or Ukraine or gun

control or climate change, and, mentally, we put them into a box called "bad for the Jews"—even if they have never said an ill word about Jews or even if they hang an Israeli flag out their window.

The century-long American-Jewish alliance with progressive causes made sense so long as it served the interests of the American Jewish community. Today, however, America is undergoing rapid, dramatic changes. We do not know what it will look like even a decade from now. The betrayal by our allies after October 7 should have taught us more than just "we had no idea our friends were secretly pro-Hamas." It should have taught us that our whole approach to allyship needs to change.

Instead of focusing on values, today our alliances should be made exclusively with those who a) reject antisemitism in all its forms, b) share our enemies in today's war, and c) are sufficiently reliable and powerful to make a difference on the battlefield. To be effective and desirable allies, we should make clear that our alliance is interest-based and can be easily revoked if our allies fail to meet the basic test of fighting Jew-hatred and Israel-hatred. And we should not undermine today's war against progressive-Islamist antisemitism for tomorrow's, because the outcome of today's will have a big impact on tomorrow's.

Unraveling century-long habits of value-based alliances will be difficult, but not impossible. The first step is to put our collective survival above our wishes for humanity, and to internalize realpolitik in our approach to allyship. Only then will we be in the best position to defeat antisemitism today, and to prepare for the next battle tomorrow. ✳

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ELLEN GINSBERG SIMON

Alumni

Hint: It's not about money

NE EVENING in the shocking and extraordinary October of 2023, I received a text message from an unknown number. The message was simple and short: "I am a current Jewish student at Brown named Joe. Someone told me to reach out to you. We need some help. Can I give you a call?" (To protect the student's identity, I'm using a pseudonym.)

I assumed this was a result of some recommendations I had made about reporting antisemitic incidents on one of the many chat groups that emerged after October 7—groups of suffering strangers finding solace in one another's virtual company.

As I texted Joe to tell him that I'd be happy to talk, I wondered aloud to my husband: "How desperate must these kids be for help that they would reach out to a total stranger for support? What on earth is going on at Brown?"

When we finally spoke, Joe gave me my first glimpse of the chaos emerging on campus. He told me tales of harassment from students and faculty alike, and of the failure of the university's

Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity to respond to filed reports. He shared examples of terrifying threats against Jews made online and in person. Jewish students were being targeted, they were afraid, and they felt alone.

This was but the first of many texts and calls from unknown numbers that I soon realized I always needed to answer. Like the call from "Sarah," another student, who had received my number from someone in the campus group Brown Students for Israel. In a tentative voice, she told me about the harassment she was experiencing in a Middle East studies class—a required course for her major. The professor had humiliated her publicly for her support of Israel, allowed classmates to jeer at her, told the class that Hamas was not a terrorist group, and was threatening to fail her on her final project. Efforts to get help from the department chairperson were useless, and she needed guidance on her options.

I was far from the only one receiving these calls and texts. As alumni, parents, and students began to find one another through WhatsApp and Facebook groups, ad hoc calls turned to sustained and regular communication. Soon, I found myself allied with a team of Brown alumni, parents, and students whom I had never met, but who were committed to preserving and protecting the ethos of an institution that we cherished deeply as a second home.

As the landscape of Jewish life on university campuses nationwide seismically shifted over the course of the past year, Jewish alumni activism was forced to evolve to address unprecedented challenges to Jewish community and life in academe. Since October 7, a new form of alumni activism has arisen: sustained and organized grassroots involvement by Jewish alumni who watched in horror as beloved alma maters devolved into sites of antisemitic frenzy, with little or no consequence for the perpetrators of harassment, discrimination, assault, and hate crimes. Jewish alumni, many of whom had never before taken an active role in campus life, have mobilized in unprecedented ways to protect Jews on campus and to try to restore universities to their foundational purpose and values.

These alumni, myself included, are motivated by their love for the institutions that once expanded their minds and launched them into the world. To this day they remain inspired by the values those institutions once instilled in them—values such as intellectual curiosity, honesty, and rigor, a respect for healthy differences of opinion, and a refusal to countenance discrimination, harassment, and exclusion.

Brown University entered the post–October 7 world in a much stronger position than most of its Ivy League brethren.

Jewish student enrollment at Brown had not declined drastically over the past decade as it had at most of its peer schools—in fact, it had increased. Brown actively recruits students from Jewish day schools rather than shunning them. Hillel board leadership and alumni-led fundraising resulted in Brown opening kosher meat and dairy kitchens in the Ratty, the main dining hall on campus. Hillel recently secured permission for a Jewish first-year student pre-orientation session for the first time. Close coordination with administrators and personal relationships fostered by alumni resulted in the establishment of a campus *eruv*—a designated area in which observant Jews may carry objects or push strollers on Shabbat—paid for in part by donors and in part by the university, increasing the ease of Shabbat observance on campus. In many respects, Brown stands out among the Ivies as one of the best options for Jewish students, a fact noted by Blake Flayton in a 2021 article, "Proud Jews Walking."

Unfortunately, even an institution this welcoming to Jews could not escape the tumult that has engulfed universities over the past several semesters. Brown students and Hillel employees have received death threats. They have been taunted with the epithet of "Zionist pig" while crossing the Main Green. Their reports of discrimination in the classroom went unaddressed. Pro-Israel students were blocked from accessing university buildings during a hunger strike, and

> Many alumni hail from a time when people could disagree in a much healthier manner, and this is part of the unique voice we bring to our activism.

they frequently sought refuge in Hillel and Chabad buildings when studying in the libraries became too perilous. When the administration negotiated an end to the Main Green encampment, it granted protesters the right to a vote on divestment by the Brown Corporation, the university's highest governing body. This launched a volatile and contentious six-month stretch of students and alumni devoting countless hours to marshall arguments and testify against divestment. The Corporation ultimately declined to divest, but not without setting a dangerous precedent.

Yet as campus life imploded, Jewish alumni were able to respond and organize at a rapid clip by drawing on a strong preexisting alumni base active in Hillel and with close relationships to the administration. By November 2023, alumni had created a powerful force for advocacy on campus: Brown Jewish Alumni & Friends (BJAF). BJAF connected students, parents, and faculty struggling through the unfathomable events on campus and in the world. This new vanguard of active alumni leaders learned in the heat of the moment how to leverage their diverse talents to try to preserve the values of our beloved university.

BJAF leaders have climbed a steep learning curve. While some of our experiences have been unique to Brown's campus dynamics, there are broader lessons we can offer on how to be effective alumni activists.

Significantly, our experiences demonstrate that effective activism

need not depend on giving or withholding large monetary contributions. Instead, we have focused on building institutional relationships, developing concrete guidance for students based on expert legal and compliance advice, and making use of the unique talents and professional expertise of alumni. We have drawn upon the distinctively collaborative Brunonian mindset instilled in us during our university years to build a strong community of effective advocates. By partnering with preexisting, effective organizations such as Hillel and campus institutes, we have been able to accomplish a great deal.

Our efforts have been organized into five main areas: education, advocacy, legal support, cultivating strategic relationships within the university, and community-building and engagement.

1. Education

We realized early on in our efforts that key academic and political perspectives were missing on campus. Through personal and professional networks and as a counter to anti-Zionist speakers on campus such as Peter Beinart and UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese, we facilitated invitations to speakers such as Einat Wilf, Bassem Eid, Dan Senor, and SAPIR editor-in-chief Bret Stephens. We also brought in training programs like Project Shema to better educate students on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the state of antisemitism in America.

2. Advocacy

BJAF advocates on behalf of Jewish students and works to ensure the safety of Jews on campus. We have issued petitions, written letters to President Christina Paxson outlining our concerns and recommendations for change, submitted position papers to the university during the divestment battle, published articles in the *Brown Daily Herald* and the *Times of Israel* decrying campus antisemitism, and successfully lobbied the Corporation to reject divestment this past fall.

3. Legal Support

Realizing that much of the harassment and abuse directed at Jewish students on campus was either illegal or contravened campus policy, we deployed our database of Brunonian lawyers to provide direct support to individuals filing complaints about policy violations and mistreatment at the hands of fellow students and faculty. Alumni helped gather and collate evidence of infractions perpetrated against Jews. Our legal brigade contributed extensive time to combatting the divestment vote by researching and drafting memoranda and briefs that were submitted to the university committee tasked with deciding whether or not to recommend that the Corporation divest. We have since published our library of anti-divestment resources on our website to support other schools facing similar struggles.

4. Cultivating Relationships

From the start, a key element of BJAF's activism was our desire to cultivate and maintain constructive relationships with President Paxson and other administrators and faculty. Paxson deserves particular credit for welcoming and maintaining that open channel and treating us with a respect that our counterparts at other schools have not often received. BJAF leaders hold regular meetings with the president to review our concerns and the school's progress in implementing changes to protect Jewish students. Although we do not always agree, and despite our frustration with the glacial "university standard time" pace of change, we know we are at least being heard. We have been able to maintain a seat at the table and to make inroads through productive, honest, and mutually respectful discussions.

5. Community-Building and Engagement

The job in front of us is a big one: Saving our institutions and restoring their ability to sustain thriving Jewish life on campus requires

tremendous collective effort. As BJAF members, we don't always agree among ourselves on the right path forward. But we have worked hard to build a culture that reflects who we are as Brown alumni: bridge-builders, not barn burners. Many alumni hail from a time when people could disagree in a much healthier manner, and this is part of the unique voice we bring to our activism. We maintain numerous lines of electronic communication across our 800-person membership and hold regular Zoom sessions with students, professors, and guest speakers. And by the time this article goes to press, we will have held our first BJAF Shabbaton on campus, bringing together in person for the first time the students and alumni activists who have forged such tight bonds.

In short, we have become family. This was no easy feat given the emotional tenor of the past 16 months. But when emotions have flared, we have been able to recenter by remembering our ultimate mandate: to serve the current students and to protect the worthwhile institution we love.

I am not naïve. Significant problematic areas remain — areas where we have been unable to effect change thus far.

We continue to confront academic elements who wield the concept of academic freedom as both sword and shield in their unremitting efforts to manipulate and indoctrinate America's youth with antisemitic and anti-Zionist invective. This is particularly true at Brown's Center for Middle East Studies, where professors refer to Israel as "the Zionist Entity" and refuse to countenance the study of Israel as part of their course offerings. Several recent troubling events have also posed serious challenges to our efforts to return Brown to a healthy, academically sound, and high-quality intellectual institution.

Take for example a conference on "Non-Zionist Jewish Traditions" organized by proudly anti-Zionist faculty, who violated Brown's recently updated Nondiscrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy by

directly attacking and delegitimizing Zionism and Zionists, contrary to the university's express guidance on how to interpret that policy. Or the absence of sufficient antisemitism training on campus, and the university's failure to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.

Encouragingly, however, our efforts at Brown have been mirrored by similar efforts among alumni of institutions across North America. Recently, BJAF linked hands with other Jewish alumni groups to form the new Jewish Alumni Council (JAC). Aimed at uniting the resources, knowledge, learnings, and voices of concerned Jewish alumni from colleges and universities across the U.S., the nascent JAC promises to strengthen the collective impact and voices of all Jewish alumni through cross-organizational cooperation.

Jewish alumni leaders across the country are indeed finding their voice.

Saving our universities is not a vanity project. This work is done out of a commitment to a flourishing Jewish life at the university that once gave us so much, the kind of rich Jewish life that will be sustained for generations to come. We refuse to abandon hope for our schools, which belong to us as much as they belong to posterity. At Brown, our work is a direct reflection of the school's own mission: "to serve the community, nation, and world by discovering, communicating, and preserving knowledge and understanding."

We are determined that this moment in history will be remembered as the spark that led to an awakening of Jewish alumni to their responsibilities, power, and importance in driving change for the better—for Jews, our institutions, and our country. ✳

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BARUCH WEISS &
MARK B. ROTENBERG

Lawfare

Protecting Jews in court

ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES and beyond, the fight against antisemitism is undergoing a revolution. For the past century, American Jews would protest, lobby, sue, and implore, in what was at best only a partially successful effort to prod the government or the courts to intervene. When the government did respond, it was too often halfheartedly. The current moment, marked by proactive confrontations between the Trump administration and universities over antisemitism, is a dramatic turning point that presents new opportunities to the Jewish community.

Antisemitism has deep roots in this country. In 1915, a mob lynched Leo Frank. In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan grew strong as it expressed hatred not only against African Americans but also against Jews. Ivy League schools imposed quotas on Jews. The legal tools available to counter antisemitism were few, and the government rarely responded at all, let alone effectively.

One notable early success took place in those difficult times, but it depended on the initiative of a single Jew named Aaron Sapiro. On March 15, 1927, trial began in a libel case brought by Sapiro, the lawyer son of impoverished immigrants, against Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company and one of the most well-known people on earth. Sapiro had been helping struggling farmers band together into cooperatives. Ford, in his antisemitic newspaper the *Dearborn Independent*, accused Sapiro of turning "American agriculture over to the International Jews." Sapiro's case was so strong that Ford—afraid to take the stand—settled, issued a retraction, and ceased publishing the *Dearborn Independent*.

But Sapiro's case against Ford was the exception, not the rule. Jewish leaders of that era struggled mightily, organizing boycotts, demonstrations, and lobbying efforts. More often than not, those efforts were only modestly successful. The Sapiro precedent was limited to the libel context, and there was no generally available civil rights statute upon which Jews could rely to fight their battles in the courts.

Until, that is, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VI of that landmark legislation empowers the government to withhold federal funds from any recipient, including any university, that tolerates discrimination based on race, color, or national origin under its auspices. The statute provides for two different procedural pathways for enforcement: Victimized students can sue the university in federal court and decide what remedies to seek or, alternatively, file a complaint with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), in which case it is the government, not the victim, that brings the case against the university and decides what remedies to seek.

It took a long time, however, to establish that the statute even extends to antisemitism. Unlike other civil rights laws, Title VI does not mention religion as a protected category—in order to allow, say, Catholic universities to hire priests. At first, the lack of clarity did not seem to matter; antisemitism was significantly and steadily waning after World War II. But a decade into this century,

antisemitism began an alarming rise. In 2004, under the direction of Kenneth L. Marcus, OCR declared that it would interpret Title VI's "national origin" category to apply to Jews (along with other groups that share a religious faith as well as an ethnic or national origin, such as Arab Muslims or Sikhs). Then, in December 2019, President Trump issued an executive order mandating that OCR consider the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism and accompanying examples when evaluating antisemitism claims. Among the examples was "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor." This extended Title VI even further, effectively deeming at least some forms of anti-Zionism to be antisemitism.

The confluence of these two events — the growing resurgence of antisemitism coupled with new legal tools to fight it — seemed to provide an opportunity to go back to the courts, following Sapiro's example.

In the months following the 2019 executive order, the two of us — along with the Brandeis Center and the Chicago Jewish United Fund — filed a Title VI complaint against the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), alleging dozens of instances of discrimination, including many based on anti-Zionism. As an example, we recounted how a university representative trained undergraduate dormitory counselors to emulate the late terrorist leader Yasser Arafat and airplane hijacker Leila Khaled in performing their dormitory duties, extolling martyrdom (yes, martyrdom for dormitory counselors!).

The first positive results were not long in coming. On November 16, 2020, as part of the settlement process, UIUC joined us in issuing the following statement:

> For many Jewish students, Zionism is an integral part of their identity and their ethnic and ancestral heritage. These students have the right to openly express identification with Israel. The

The pressure exerted by the Trump administration has catalyzed action where there had previously been stagnation.

university will safeguard the abilities of these students, as well as all students, to participate in university-sponsored activities free from discrimination and harassment.

The story, then, of antisemitism during the first 20 years of this millennium was one of slow and steady increase accompanied by similarly slow and steady progress by the Jewish community in fighting it. That fight was waged primarily in the form of complaints to OCR and a trickle of lawsuits in the courts. The strategy for the past couple of decades has been to achieve small victories—settlements and court rulings—that would in aggregate embed solid protections against antisemitism into American law. But that was before October 7, 2023, and before President Trump's second term. Even then, however, Title VI cases alleging discrimination based on anti-Zionist expressions of antisemitism were still nowhere as common as they have recently become. Since October 7, there have been more than 3,400 reported antisemitic incidents on American college campuses (compared with 27 in 2013–2014, when Hillel first began tracking the numbers). The post–October 7 number includes more than 70 assaults against Jewish students, more than 800 attacks on Jewish property, and more than 200 acts of vandalism targeting Hillel locations. Most of the current torrent of Title VI antisemitism cases against schools have yet to be resolved, though there was a spike of 14 settlements during the final months of the Biden administration, several of which have resulted in significant changes on campus. The Hillel director at the University of

The Columbia example shows that an institution that dragged its feet for years in addressing onerous conditions for its Jewish students has now agreed to steps that were unthinkable even to ask for in private Title VI cases.

Vermont, for example, described a "night and day" difference since its settlement in April 2023. This success was due to painstaking strategic legal work. Jews have had to push hard to get the government and the universities to respond.

Enter the Trump administration, which within days of taking office announced the creation of a Federal Task Force to Combat Antisemitism whose "first priority will be to root out anti-Semitic harassment in schools and on college campuses." It became clear almost immediately that we were now living in a very different world. Rather than filing complaints with OCR and waiting many months for them to be processed and investigated, which sometimes resulted in a negotiated settlement, the new task force announces that a school has violated Jewish students' rights, demands sweeping changes, and threatens heavy sanctions if the institution does not immediately agree to comply. Early results have been swift.

At Columbia, for example, the site of the most ferocious protests, the university had dragged its feet in exercising control over its campus and thereby allowed a hostile environment for Jewish

students to fester. On March 7, the task force announced the cancellation of approximately $400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia. "Freezing the funds is one of the tools we are using to respond to this spike in anti-Semitism. This is only the beginning," said the head of the task force. On March 21, Columbia agreed to the task force demands and committed to significant reforms, including robust disciplinary procedures for students and student organizations who violate regulations governing protests; hiring 36 special officers with arrest authority; mandatory Title VI training for administrators; expanding intellectual diversity in academic programs and faculty appointments; and appointing a senior vice provost to oversee the Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department.

The pressure exerted by the Trump administration has catalyzed action where there had previously been stagnation. After decades of careful fighting through painstaking legal and administrative processes, the Jewish community now sees its struggle being fought directly by the Trump administration, which has placed campus antisemitism at the very center of its larger campaign to fight DEI and "reclaim our once great educational institutions from the radical Left and Marxist maniacs."

For those of us who have long been in the fight against campus antisemitism, the administration's revolutionary results are cause for both marvel and caution. No one can fail to appreciate the administration's quick action to protect students after the frustrating inaction of the past. That said, the administration's rhetoric and actions, while directed at many of the same objectives the Jewish community has been advancing for years, seem to be aimed at reshaping the universities more broadly rather than combating the antisemitism within them. A recent threat by the head of the antisemitism task force that "we're going to bankrupt these universities [and] take away every single federal dollar" could in fact hurt Jewish students, parents, and alumni who are deeply dependent on and connected to these institutions.

The interests of Jewish students and those of the administration

may not always be one and the same. Harvard is a good example. Jewish students brought a pair of lawsuits against Harvard; the cases settled. As recently as January 21, 2025 (the day after Trump's second inauguration, as it happens), Kenneth L. Marcus himself, chairman of the Brandeis Center and one of the plaintiff's counsel in the Harvard litigation, praised Harvard for acknowledging "that a rule against Zionists is a rule against Jews," noting that Harvard's settlement was "the strongest we've seen so far, and it marks a major victory for Jewish students."

Despite Marcus's expression of satisfaction, the Trump administration has proceeded to assert additional demands, including changes to the university's governance structure that the school said amounted to placing the entire university under government oversight. Accepting these demands would be, in the estimation of Harvard, tantamount to allowing itself to be taken over by the federal government, and the university rejected them. The Trump administration responded by freezing more than $2 billion in Harvard's grants and contracts. It later announced plans to pull an additional $1 billion of Harvard's funding for health research and is exploring revoking the university's tax-exempt status — an act of open financial war.

Episodes like this, and the billions of dollars of sanctions imposed on other universities, raise the question of how the Jewish community ought best navigate the differences between the Jewish community's goals and tactics and those of the administration. One reason Jewish students and faculty choose to attend and work at research universities is to be part of cutting-edge research in medicine, public health, and STEM fields heavily supported by federal grants that make America's research universities the envy of the world. For the past 20 years, the Jewish community's efforts have been focused on enabling Jewish students to thrive — intellectually, religiously, and socially — on these campuses, contributing to life-saving work on tuberculosis, childhood cancer, and health and nutrition support for impoverished populations. For several

> The fundamental question now facing the Jewish community is whether to fall in line behind the administration's efforts or remain committed to its own course of legal activism.

years, Hillel's Campus Climate Initiative has been working with thousands of university leaders to help them understand the needs of their Jewish students for safety and equal treatment, to be sure, but also for a broad set of reforms, including strict enforcement of protest and demonstration rules, mandatory antisemitism training for faculty and students, holiday accommodations, kosher dining, richer curricular offerings on Zionism, Israel, and Jewish history, and so on. While it may seem intuitive to embrace the administration's revolutionary tactics, we who have been in the trenches fighting antisemitism for decades now must maintain a clear focus on our own specific goals and the tactics that will achieve them.

As of this writing, it is unclear how a half dozen or so other large universities will respond to the administration's cutoffs of their funding—concede or fight—but what is clear is that the struggle against campus antisemitism has been reshaped in the administration's image. On the road to a campus culture more hospitable to Jews, the Jewish community is no longer in the driver's seat. It is the Trump administration. And that fact carries important implications, positive and negative.

On the positive side, the administration's use of severe sanctions will require universities to respond at a speed and with concessions

that were previously unheard-of. The Columbia example shows that an institution that dragged its feet for years in addressing onerous conditions for its Jewish students has now agreed to steps that were unthinkable even to ask for in private Title VI cases. Fear of financial ruin is a potent motivator.

On the other hand, the Trump administration's reliance on preemptive declarations and executive orders skips long-accepted legal due process procedures of investigation and fact-finding that normally precede governmental sanctions. This circumvention of due process effectively undermines the Jewish community's strategy, painstakingly pursued over many years, to build legal protections for Jewish students into the fabric of American law. It bears remembering that a future administration can rescind Trump's executive orders and sanctions just as easily as Trump has issued them.

Aside from due process considerations, there are other points of departure between the community's strategic approach and that of the administration. The community has long sought to impress upon university leaders their legal, moral, and mission-driven responsibility to protect Jewish students' rights. But the administration's approach is already triggering a backlash movement. This movement asserts that campus antisemitism actually is not the serious problem the Jewish community claims it is, but rather a cover for far-reaching and sudden right-wing attempts to subvert universities, the engine of America's research and development ecosystem. Such a backlash is hardly in the interest of Jewish students on campuses across the country.

The fundamental question now facing the Jewish community is whether to fall in line behind the administration's efforts or remain committed to its own course of legal activism.

In our view, the answer is clear. The Jewish community's legal activism is indispensable for long-term, durable change. Instead of outsourcing that fight to the administration's task force, the Jewish community should take advantage of the new legal landscape the task force has created. Namely, one of high pressure on universities to crack down quickly on antisemitic harassment and

remedy violations of Jewish students' rights. Under these circumstances, the Jewish community must aggressively expand and pursue its own lawsuits in federal courts, where they are more likely than ever before to obtain favorable settlement terms. Remember that Title VI affords two distinct avenues of recourse: filing lawsuits in federal court or lodging administrative complaints with OCR. After decades of favoring the second avenue, the new legal environment warrants pivoting toward the first. This will put the reins back in the Jewish community's hands at a time when they are likely to prove more useful than before.

It has been nearly 100 years since attorney Sapiro's landmark case against Henry Ford. The lesson of Sapiro's case at the time was that the Jewish community could have confidence in American courts, the rule of law, and the protection of minority rights. Faith in those institutional values was a cornerstone of what is widely regarded as a great American Jewish century marked by unprecedented levels of Jewish flourishing in innumerable areas of American life.

But there might be an even greater, more timeless lesson in the fact that Sapiro brought the case himself, rather than hand it over to someone with more fame and power. For American Jews, that lesson may only now be coming into view, but it is the same lesson every Jewish community learns after every eruption of antisemitism.

That the fight against antisemitism, in the end, is ours to win. ✳

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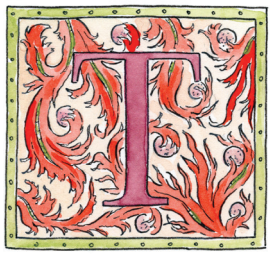
SARA FORMAN

Politics

Jews can win back the Democratic Party



THE AMERICAN Jewish community's long track record of pluralistic activism reflects a deep commitment to (largely) progressive governance. For decades, its contributions focused on issues with a universal focus: the advancement of labor rights, religious freedom, feminism, disability accessibility, voting rights, and civil rights. These commitments are chiefly why American Jews have historically made the Democratic Party their political home as voters and as donors. But the problems inside that home, namely increased hostility toward Israel and apathy toward distinctly Jewish concerns, have become impossible to ignore.

It's not the first time Jews had to question their sense of home. In his seminal work, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, the noted German-born Jewish economist and World War II resistance leader Albert O. Hirschman explained that when an organization

exhibits signs of decline, its members are confronted with the choice to exercise their right to voice their grievances and exert pressure for improvement, or their right to *exit*, with *loyalty* being the measure of the two.

Legacy Jewish organizations, both nonprofit and political, such as the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Federation system, and AIPAC exemplify the centrist institutional convergence by working as advocates within established political and social frameworks. These groups have long been pillars of bipartisan Jewish political advocacy, with their focus on combating antisemitism and other forms of hatred, promoting civic engagement, and supporting Israel. With their strategic use of what Hirschman referred to as *voice*, these traditional organizations leverage their institutional credibility and access to policymakers to push for stronger hate crime laws, access to relevant social services, and, in AIPAC's case, support of Israel as a bedrock of American foreign policy. Much of the Jewish community has historically been happy to be represented by such institutions.

But unlike legacy community organizations, individual Jews can operate as free agents, and many on the political Left have opted to exit these organizations, some because their voice failed to persuade, some because they were never all that at home in the first place. Born out of this disaffiliation are groups such as J Street, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), and IfNotNow. And where are they now exercising their voice? The Democratic Party.

The left-flank insurgency in the Democratic Party has been growing at least since 2004. It began with the presidential campaign of then–Representative Dennis Kucinich. It gained nearly unstoppable momentum with Bernie Sanders's reshaping of internal Democratic discourse, which in turn helped lead a weakened Hillary Clinton to lose to Donald Trump in 2016. Today, the Democratic Party finds itself relatively rudderless in its domestic squabbling over social justice issues and support for Israel.

The question is: Which Jewish voices will determine the future of the Democratic Party? Will it be those of House Democratic Steering Committee Co-Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, two of the highest-ranking Jewish elected officials in American history, the latter of whom recently wrote a book about antisemitism, including in his own party? Or will it be Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)?

The latter group has made powerful use of its identity-based affiliation by becoming a vocal contingent within both the identity-based activist insurgency and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). These groups have been smart to treat internal party politics as the crucial battleground. They have exercised their voice to elect far-left politicians in low-turnout primary contests, particularly in locales that are so solidly Democratic that non-Democrats can't plausibly expect to win. The candidates they have elected since 2018 can now serve as a bench for ever-higher offices. This new generation of elected illiberals now holds more than a dozen state and municipal offices in New York alone, many running on a blatantly anti-Israel agenda, presented in intersectionalist language, whitewashing the Trojan horse of antisemitism.

A prime example of how Democratic Party infrastructure can be exploited for far-left purposes is the mayoral campaign of current New York City candidate and New York State Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani. Mamdani is running on a populist platform that includes things such as "free" buses (never mind that the mayor doesn't control the MTA), city-owned grocery stores that will fix prices, and an unrelenting commitment to calling the war in Gaza a "genocide." He has led all candidates in the race in fundraising; his total number of donations (16,000 donors) dwarfs that of his closest competitors, including formidable front-runner Andrew Cuomo (2,800 donors).

Today, the Democratic Party finds itself relatively rudderless in its domestic squabbling over social justice issues and support for Israel.

At the same time that the far-Left has gained ground in the Democratic Party machine, some Jews have chosen to exit the party entirely to become Independents or Republicans. While some have trumpeted this "Jexit," the numbers have been debated. (What is certainly true is that Trump won a larger share of the Jewish vote in 2024 than he did in 2016.)

The time is past due for liberals and moderates to save the party from its own activist class. In New York, a state governed almost entirely by Democrats on a municipal, legislative, and executive level, and home to the world's second-largest Jewish community, failure to do so will undermine Jewish causes precipitously. The moderates and Jewish mainstream still hold the clear advantage — organizationally, financially, and politically. There is no reason to give it up and back down from this fight.

The New York Solidarity Network (NYSN), a first-of-its-kind centrist Jewish membership organization, mobilized in the wake of this anti-Israel activism to focus on local races and stave off the wave of extremist anti-Israel lawmakers headed for federal office. Since October 7, NYSN membership and involvement have grown exponentially, after many Jews realized it was the now-or-never moment.

The network's membership structure is novel yet critical: Its members provide financial support directly to candidates facing DSA opponents in New York's Democratic primary. Disgruntled

Independents or other would-be exiters are encouraged to reclaim their voice by registering as Democrats to vote in such primaries, where New York's races are effectively decided. These races are often won by a handful of votes, not to mention for a fraction of the campaign cost. (A competitive New York State Assembly race, for example, will cost around $450,000, which amounts to a rounding error in a competitive U.S. House race).

NYSN has also built strong coalitions outside the community, sharing pragmatic and realistic goals for reshaping communal activism. By building alliances with like-minded moderate and pragmatic groups (many of which were formerly part of the progressive infrastructure), the network is helping to write a new playbook for grassroots intersectional alliances.

But it is not only in such coalitions that Jewish activism has seen a resurgence. New York also has a robust sphere of independent expenditure committees and super PACs with strong ties to, and interest in, traditional Jewish voices, including New Yorkers for a Better Future, Stand Up PAC, Brooklyn BridgeBuilders, and Jewish Voters Action Network. Unlike the traditional Jewish organizations that have aimed to speak for the Jewish community (as, ironically, have organizations such as JVP), this new model empowers Jews to take political action as individuals. Other states and cities ought to follow this model. In Pittsburgh, for instance, the Beacon Coalition, a group currently focused on the mayoral race and battling anti-Israel ballot initiatives and city council votes, has had a wave of successes, bringing the Jewish community together to work toward common liberal anti-leftist goals.

With new vehicles of participation, these constituencies are choosing voice over exit. Restoring New York as a safe place for Jewish life and ensuring that the Democratic Party remains a worthy home for American Jewry are causes as crucial today as they have ever been. And they go hand in hand with maintaining a cohesive center and finding like-minded communities with whom to partner and uplift.

We have refused the option to exit and are building a new and reliable base for Jews and non-Jews alike who align with our values. Whether through traditional philanthropy, political activism, or grassroots efforts, we will need to engage in complex battles to ensure that the illiberal activists remain a fringe element and do not replace the mainstream. The Hirschman paradigm, and a firm commitment to voice rather than exit, is possible only if our activism is focused on opposing the acceptance of casual and overt antisemitism, support for Israel, and our community's safety.

Hirschman didn't publish *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* until 1970. After trying to prevent the Nazi rise to power, he left Germany for Paris in 1933, taking a leave from his graduate studies in 1936 to fight the Fascists in Spain, working with the Emergency Rescue Committee during World War II, and then for the U.S. Army during and after the war. The lesson of his indefatigable wartime life of non-surrender is simple: Wherever you have a voice, use it. Dare them to take it from you. ✳

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DEPARTURES

JESSE TISCH

Jewish Masterpiece: *A Guide for the Bedevilled*

The fire in Ben Hecht's mind burned everything it touched — most spectacularly, antisemitism

OME BOOKS IMPROVE with time. Others, written long ago, seem almost clairvoyant, as if they somehow projected themselves into our modern moment, in all its muddle and chaos.

One of these strange time travelers is Ben Hecht's *A Guide for the Bedevilled*, written in 1943 and addressed to a world gone crazy. A sane, busy book, perfectly pitched between hope and despair, it seems to leap out of its own era directly into ours.

Hecht, a novelist, playwright, and screenwriting savant, followed the war, and Nazi atrocities, with deep anguish. His Jewish heart didn't mourn, he said: "It has felt only outrage." Equally enraging was

the civilized world's response, its indifference, complicity, and denial.

Hecht's favorite weapon wasn't invective, it was ridicule, and he used it fervently. Germans, politicians, students — all are impaled on Hecht's pen. At one point, Hecht invents a new sport, competitive antisemitism, in which the best antisemites from Harvard compete against the best antisemites from Yale.

When he wasn't lancing antisemitism, he was probing it, analyzing it. Historians focused on what and when. Hecht wanted to know why. Many of his hunches, while purely intuitive, have proved astute, reaffirmed by later thinkers who struck Hechtian chords in their writing.

One of Hecht's darkest theories found expression in the stunning remark quoted by Henryk Broder: "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz." Hecht saw that clearly. German guilt would fester. "They already have it, and are already engaged in the medical work of its exercising," he wrote. "This is done by exchanging the guilt complex for a rage at the thing that produced it."

The real scandal, he claimed, wasn't antisemitism, but the world's incurable waywardness. "And if you read this some day far distant," Hecht wrote, predicting madness ahead, "credit my bones with having understood the two chief ingredients of human thought. They are poison and folly."

A book that indicts the world risks undermining its other mission: to indict specific nations for specific crimes. Hecht wasn't troubled by that, or by his rather unscholarly reputation. At the time, Hecht's name still conjured Hollywood classics. People thought, *His Girl Friday*. They thought, *Scarface*. They didn't think *Jewish anti-fascist*.

Hecht had grown up in New York City and Racine, Wisconsin, the coddled first son of Russian immigrants. As a younger writer, Hecht projected world-weary cynicism, a natural pose for a budding

journalist. Before long, he earned his cynicism covering Germany's bloody revolution. Yet Hecht contained multitudes. His pessimism masked an eager, adventurous spirit.

Over 20 years, Hecht married twice, made several fortunes, and won two Oscars. When he wasn't serving Hollywood, he wrote books and plays — his true calling, he insisted. Yet he lived heedlessly, shuttling between coasts, spending lavishly on houses, helpers, and chauffeurs. When bankruptcy loomed, he returned reluctantly to Hollywood.

By World War II, Hecht had lived several lives, yet his Jewish life was mostly private. Quite quickly, it became public: Hecht wrote articles and screaming advertisements demanding "Action — Not Pity." His friends were amazed. Hecht had always played a man coasting through life, cynically amused. Now every mask fell. "My tribe is called Israel," he wrote.

It was this older, more earnest Hecht, concerned with living purposefully and outraged over Nazism, who wrote *A Guide for the Bedevilled* in 1943.

What qualified Hecht for his task? Nothing, really, except passion, wide learning, and a writer's necessary vanity. At home in Nyack, New York, he hunkered down with his typewriter. Hecht had two secret helpers: his wife, Rose, a committed Zionist, and Maxwell Perkins, the legendary editor of Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

The writing was, as his letters reveal, an ordeal. For weeks, Hecht wallowed in horrors — shootings, gassings. His anger was beyond words, yet words were all he had. At times he wondered what to write: a j'accuse? A polemic? Could his book be entertaining? Should it?

Hecht solved the final problem by ignoring it. *Bedevilled* is livelier and wittier than a book about prejudice has any right to be. It's also more psychologically astute. On the whole, Hecht wasn't

Hecht's central theory is that antisemitism isn't just a disease. It's also a treatment.

interested in extreme cases. Most people weren't Hitler. Rather, he focused on what we might call normal psychopathology: everyday prejudice, ordinary sadism.

Antisemitism involved projection — "transferring our own sickness to others." It centered on power. The antisemite is a bully, and, like all bullies, is secretly weak. Venting his prejudice, he goes "from a mouse to a roaring lion."

Reader beware: Freud lurks in the margins. Hecht's antisemites are mostly misfits, anxious, neurotic types, sick with inferiority. They embrace what Sartre called the "poor man's snobbery" and what Anthony Julius calls "the religion of the inadequate."

Indeed, it's Julius, the great jurist and antisemitism expert, whom Hecht often resembles. "Anti-Semitism invites us to take a moral holiday," Julius has written. For Hecht, it was precisely this "thrill of lawlessness" that inspired antisemites "to break the laws of logic, sanity, and good behavior."

Hecht's central theory is that antisemitism isn't just a disease. It's also a treatment. Antisemites seek relief for some problem — and find it. Sadists find a victim (the Jews). Loners find a group (Jew-haters). Aimless people find a purpose (antisemitic activity). Prejudice, says Hecht, is a panacea: "so soothing, so enriching, so ego-inflating."

Today, we understand antisemitism as complex and protean. Its hallmarks are malice and paranoia, but it takes myriad forms in myriad places. It's so varied, we might speak of *antisemitisms*, plural.

Bedevilled is a 240-page argument for Jewish assertiveness. In an emergency, American Jews should forget civility and politeness.

These nuances aren't absent from *Bedevilled*, which offers a typology of antisemites — leaders, followers, criminals, elites. Yet *Bedevilled* goes beyond psychology. It's a genre of one, a beguiling mix of memoir, history, and attack that moves nimbly and unpredictably. Some sections are fortissimo; others are adagio. "This is an odd enterprise," Hecht admitted. As for the reader: "I am a little alarmed at the disorder in store for him."

Nonetheless, the book gains momentum. On page 156, Hecht blasts Nazi "excrescences." Soon he broadens the indictment. It wasn't just fascists who deserved scorn, it was bystanders, silent witnesses. "It is these Nice People who make all horror and wretchedness possible — by their unfunctioning Niceness." Through their connivance, they became accomplices, enablers.

Hecht wasn't finished. A final, sweeping judgment follows. What was antisemitism but a form of mass delusion? It was the "backwardness and stupidity of the world" that fostered genocide; it was "the human genius for prejudice." In Hecht's era, theories of "human nature" were popular. Hecht's was suitably grim.

At such moments, *Bedevilled* is a genuinely troubling book. What makes it so vital, so shocking, is Hecht's violent mind, his blazing anger. At times the reader leans back, as from the thermal force of a nuclear blast. *Bedevilled* might even be considered a dangerous book for readers inclined to adopt Hecht's pessimism.

And yet, for all its darkness, *Bedevilled* refuses despair. It's

too energetic for that. Reading it, one recalls that writing is an act of hope — for progress and thinking. "Without hope!" Hecht writes toward the end. "Have you also misunderstood my violence and pessimism?"

Indeed, a battered hope prevails. Hecht's assault on humanity is also a defense of humanism — the belief in human potential and dignity. "I once lived in a good world," Hecht wrote in 1941, daring to wish that "it will be good enough to live in again." That spirit — hope in unhopeful times — infuses *Bedevilled*, giving the reader ballast.

That *Bedevilled* reads smoothly is an amazement. Modesty borders anger. Hope abuts despair. How does *Bedevilled* survive its contradictions? In short, it's the writing. *Bedevilled* is beautifully composed. And it's beautifully *composed* — calm and unruffled. The mind is on fire, but the pen is steady.

However powerful, the laws of physics still applied. A book can't defeat fascism. It can't rescue Jews. It can't cure prejudice. "Such investigations as this are as powerless as a wind blowing at a mountain base," Hecht sighed. But it could hearten allies. And it could certainly offer guidance.

Much of *Bedevilled* addresses the question *How should a Jew be?* For Hecht, Jewish morale — pride, self-respect — mattered most. "I felt that the Jews have been trying to arouse all kinds of emotions in the world — pity, compassion, horror, guilt," Hecht told a friend. No more, he said firmly. No pleading. No virtuous poses. "Jewish diplomacy has been wasting its time in this fashion for almost twenty centuries," he says in *Bedevilled*. It was undignified — and useless.

Nor should Jews remain *shtum*. *Bedevilled* is a 240-page argument for Jewish assertiveness. In an emergency, American Jews should forget civility and politeness. Such postures offered "a way out from

uncomfortable Jewish emotions—pain and vengeance." So accept your anger. Better yet, harness it.

Hecht's anger, a terrific muse, soon gave way to anxiety. To Maxwell Perkins, *Bedevilled* was "a magnificent piece of fiery writing," but Hecht shied from publicity. "If my book is a bomb," he told a friend, "I don't want it detonated in any way." He couldn't smile and charm interviewers. He wouldn't "cash in" on Jewish suffering.

Ultimately, it didn't matter. A PR blitz was on. "Ben has dipped his pen in blood and punched as only he can punch when he's mad," his friend Billy Rose told Walter Winchell, the popular gossip columnist. The book was doomed to succeed. "I am tossing back all my royalties from the book into its promotion," Hecht told Winchell.

The dark book about dark times was a crowd-pleaser. Readers loved Hecht's enlivening company, his fierce, anarchic mind. But his appeal went deeper. In a way, Hecht's bomb was also a balm. At a fearful moment for American Jews, Hecht's confident pride, his moral certainty, was consoling. As the world unraveled, Hecht's clarity and sanity were a tonic.

No wonder *Bedevilled* feels current. In our own dark times, bad ideas flourish, ignorance feeds cruelty, and cruelty is seen as courage. Hecht would recognize the face of zealotry, would see it, literally, in people's faces. The pleasure of contempt. The excitement of hating. The bliss of easy virtue. Hecht never imagined "Queers for Palestine" or calls to "globalize the intifada," but he wouldn't be surprised. *Prejudice*, he once wrote: "so soothing, so enriching, so ego-inflating." In campus radicals, Hecht might see the human craving for community, for purpose, for importance.

He might note—again—how malice and pristine ignorance seem to go together.

The author of *Bedevilled* was an apostle of common sense. "I had only one objective in my book," Hecht told a friend. "It was to communicate to any readers the health I have always felt in my mind." The world was sick with hatred and ideology. ("Ideas seem to make monsters out of people," Hecht noted.) The antidote was sanity and skepticism.

After the Holocaust, Hecht's activism focused on Israel's independence. He wrote a popular pageant, *A Flag Is Born*. He hosted Menachem Begin in Nyack. He continued preaching Jewish pride and dignity.

After 1949, the old Hecht, the individualist, reasserted himself. Hecht even claimed, preposterously, that Jewish causes "[never] entered my bloodstream, glands, nervous system or memory box." His wife was astonished. "You forget all you did for the Jews already," she told him.

In truth, Hecht never moved on, not for long. He would recall his activism proudly, and with good reason. In writing *Bedevilled*, he found a noble mission and gave the best of himself to it. His greatest weapon — his writing — was put to the greatest use. He even found a community.

"Your book has swelled my head and given me new strength," a rabbi gushed, thanking Hecht and blessing *Bedevilled*.

"At last," he wrote, saluting a *landsman* and kindred spirit. ✳

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וַיִּרְאֹ֕ו אֵ֖ת אֱלֹהֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל וְתַחַת
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— שמות כד:י

Jewish activism is not a gene or a meme.
It is not an inherited trait, but an inherited language and practice.
Like any practice, it exists only by being practiced.

AMOTZ ASA-EL · 10

Like Herzl, Ben-Gurion knew that there is a balance
to strike between what can be done now and what can be
done by others in other times.

AMIT SEGAL · 20

Under the right circumstances, student activism can be a vital part of learning how to become a leader who changes society for the better.

CHRISTINA H. PAXSON · 28

A news media that repeatedly betrays its promise to play it straight impoverishes and coarsens the discourse of democracy.

BRET STEPHENS · 50

For nations, allyship grounded in shared values rather than cold interests is, at best, a peacetime luxury. . . . But for those facing military threats on their doorstep, passing up on powerful allies because they don't share your values can be a form of suicide.

DAVID HAZONY · 116

Whether through traditional philanthropy, political activism, or grassroots efforts, we will need to engage in complex battles to ensure that the illiberal activists remain a fringe element and do not replace the mainstream.

SARA FORMAN · 146