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Publisher's Note

'Extreme ownership' for Jews



HIS is SAPIR's 20th volume (or 21st, if you include our War in Israel special edition), marking five years of offering ideas for a thriving Jewish future. It's the first time we have returned to a previously covered theme. To write about Jewish aspiration, as we did in the early months of 2022, long before October 7, meant dreaming big: winning the war of ideas for Israel; making Zionism sexy again; fostering Muslim–Jewish and black–Jewish reconciliation; promoting universal Jewish literacy.

Jewish aspiration after October 7 is a different story. Paradoxically, it requires more realism and more ambition.

Jews in 2026 are a sobered people. Sobered by Hamas's savagery—and by the worldwide glee the savagery elicited. Sobered by the suffering of the hostages—and by the defacement of posters bearing their images in one American city after another. Sobered

by the rape of Israeli women — and by the so-called feminists who downplayed it and the progressives who denied it. Sobered by the campus Maoists — and by the moral collapse of university leaders in the face of their bullying and bad faith. Sobered by the speed with which Israel was accused of genocide — and by the readiness of supposedly serious people to endorse a preposterous charge. Sobered by “Jew hunts” in Amsterdam — and by the slap on the wrist that Dutch authorities meted out to the perpetrators. Sobered by Iranian ballistic missiles slamming into Israeli hospitals and apartment blocks — and by human rights organizations saying nothing about these undoubted war crimes. Sobered by the election of Zohran Mamdani — and by the knowledge that an estimated one-third of Jewish voters chose to install as New York’s mayor a man who would delete the Jewish state and arrest its leaders. Sobered by Tucker Carlson and Nick Fuentes and Candace Owens — and by the realization that the conservative movement in America no longer excommunicates the antisemites in its midst.

The point of sobriety isn’t despair. It’s clarity. And clarity is the best basis for progress.



What should we be clear about in 2026? Another paradox: Jews are more vulnerable than we’ve been since the 1940s. We’re also much stronger. Figuring out how to harness the first reality to the second ought to be our chief aspiration — the one from which other aspirations follow.

Consider a trio of stories out of Israel. In July, Slovenia announced an arms embargo on Israel. Yet, as *Haaretz* later reported, the Balkan state continued to purchase millions of dollars in arms from Israel through a “bypass route.” In November, the IDF hosted some 130 for-

eign military officers for a weeklong seminar about the lessons learned from two years of war. Among the participating nations, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, were Canada, Britain, and Germany—all countries that had pledged full or partial military embargoes on Israel.

Then, in December, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on an IDF-sponsored military-technology conference in Tel Aviv, which included Canada and the U.K. along with other supposed boycotters, such as Norway. “The turnout—much larger than the previous year, according to the organizers—reinforced how Israeli military technology retains its allure regardless of the country’s diplomatic isolation over Gaza,” the *Journal* noted, adding that in 2024, Israelis exported nearly \$15 billion worth of arms, mostly to Europe.

What do these stories show? On their face, they’re a tale of Israeli strength. They underscore the indispensability of Israeli know-how and can-do, particularly to countries suddenly confronted with real threats to their security. And they highlight the hypocrisy of foreign governments whose anti-Israel posturing masks their abiding need for what the Jewish state has to offer.

But they also illustrate the reluctance of Israeli diplomats and military leaders to take advantage of the hard power they have for the sake of the soft power they don’t. Would it really hurt Israel’s bottom line so much if every country that announced any kind of boycott of Israel got boycotted in return? Would it have been such a loss if the Canadian or Norwegian officials who attended the Tel Aviv conference had been told instead that they weren’t welcome as long as their governments’ anti-Israel policies remained in effect?

Now turn to the United States. Though events since October 7 have underscored the degree to which elite universities are hostile to the well-being of Jewish students, this was hardly a secret to anyone who had been paying attention in previous decades. The documentary film *Columbia Unbecoming*, with its focus on the university’s Middle

East studies department, was made in 2004. In December 2022, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “more than 1,000 Jewish students from 550 colleges and universities mostly in the U.S. and Canada have shared 2,208 experiences with bias over the past 2½ years.”

Yet, year after year, wealthy Jewish donors lavished these campuses with new buildings, centers, programs, scholarships, and endowed chairs. They, too, had hard power in the form of financial leverage. But, with rare exceptions, they failed to use that power by demanding changes to the academic and social cultures of the universities they supported.

Then came October 7, and many of those same donors finally revolted. They canceled or withheld tens of millions of dollars’ worth of planned gifts. Jewish trustees who previously had taken a diffident approach when it came to campus ideology started demanding action. University administrators rediscovered, if not their principles, then their instincts for professional self-preservation in the face of alumni outrage, media scrutiny, and congressional hearings. The Trump administration may have gone too far in wielding antisemitism as a political cudgel. But it did, in fact, extract meaningful concessions from schools, including Columbia and Northwestern, to put a stop to their endless indulgence of antisemites.

It’s probably too soon to call this a success story. But it’s an example of what Jews can do when they abandon what I’ve elsewhere called an “ingratiation strategy” in favor of a respect strategy. What’s the difference? Ingratiation is an ask. Respect is a demand. Ingratiation seeks acceptance. Respect insists on reciprocity. The aim of ingratiation is to be liked and loved. The aim of respect is to be admired, feared, or simply left alone.

Ingratiation may be a normal reflex of any diasporic community trying to get along with its host society. In many ways and for many decades, it served American Jews well. Surveys used to show that a

broad majority of Americans liked and admired and sympathized with us. We were, in the words of our most famous convert, Sammy Davis Jr., a “swinging bunch of people,” as John Podhoretz reminded us in a 2023 SAPIR essay.

But ingratiation is a strategy that works only once. Nobody recovers from no longer being liked by trying that much harder to be liked: not in middle school, not in the Middle East, and not in Middle America. At some point in the past few years, the long era of good feelings between Jews and the rest of America began to cool. Now America is learning that it can be just as cool to be against the Jews: because we are Zionists or Zionist-adjacent; because we are white or “white passing”; because we are privileged or haven’t checked our privilege. There’s always a pretext.



The answer to no longer being liked is to no longer want to be liked. It’s to refuse to hanker for the approval of others; to be indifferent to their hatred and their love; to refuse, above all, their pity. It’s to demonstrate a willingness to use one’s skills, assets, and power in the service of one’s own interests. If that feels as though it runs counter to the more progressive versions of Jewish ethics, it’s worth recalling the order of Rabbi Hillel’s dictum: Self-respect (“If I am not for myself...”) is the basis of respect (“who will be for me?”), which, in turn, is the precondition for kindness (“If I am only for myself, what am I?”).

The point is: It doesn’t work the other way around.

Hillel also asks: “If not now, when?” The foremost need in Jewish life today is not about achieving this or that political or material goal, desirable as any number of them might be. It is about a change of consciousness, a psychological and spiritual shift in the mindset of the Jewish people. We are not, nor must we ever again become, a

nation of victims. We need to stop pleading for the world's sympathy, however much we might be entitled to it. We need to get out of the habit of feeling helplessly outraged and into the practice of purposeful self-preservation.

That means that it is on us to assure our safety, from Brooklyn to Be'eri to Bondi Beach. It is on us to change the media landscape if we don't like the way the stories important to us are being covered. It is on us to invest in the schools and universities that suit our needs—a commitment to genuine merit above all—and divest from the ones that don't, however illustrious their names might be. It is on us to put a stop to arms embargoes and other boycott efforts by making our adversaries pay a price for their posturing. It is on us to create a future generation of knowledgeable, committed, and proud Jews, primarily through new and creative investments in Jewish day schools and a talented rabbinate.

To adopt the title of a popular book written by two former Navy SEALs about what makes their military units effective, Jews in Israel and the Diaspora need a mindset of "Extreme Ownership." The problems we have, the challenges we face, are ultimately ours alone to solve. Taking possession of those problems and challenges, adopting a posture of complete personal and communal agency, is the only solid route to survival and success. If that sounds exaggerated and implausible, consider what happens when we entrust our fate to the probity or kindness of strangers.

The essays in this issue offer a set of distinct and original proposals for some of what should and can be done. But they hardly exhaust the topic. If there is one thing to which every Jew has a birthright, it's the aspiration to remake our world. *

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