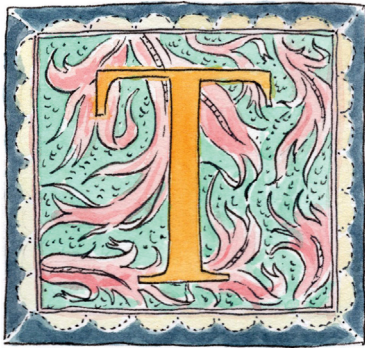


AARON KAPLOWITZ

Bad Influence

*When Israel's online supporters
do more harm than good*



HERE is one image from the war I cannot shake, and in my mind it will outlast the rest. It is a photo of a burned-out house in Kfar Aza, one of the kibbutzim where families were murdered in their beds on October 7. On the scorched wall hangs a banner in Hebrew. To one side stands

ZAKA's Yossi Landau, the man whose job is to collect human remains so the dead can be buried in accordance with Jewish law. His face is weary, his shoulders slumped, and his eyes closed. Beside him, one leg lifted and her hip turned, a prominent dance influencer poses. Her Instagram caption insists that what she saw was real, and she dares anyone who doubts her to unfollow her account. There's something *Zoolander* about the whole spectacle: a model striking a pose in a place where people were slaughtered, while the dead are repurposed as set design. The centerpiece is her.

The photograph captures an indignity that has become commonplace since the weeks after October 7. Many personalities

who have been elevated within the pro-Israel community are self-promoters cloaked in activism. At the exact moment when Jews around the world need moral seriousness, parts of the communal establishment have fallen for the most opportunistic actors on the least serious platform. We are confusing visibility with leadership, and follower numbers with wisdom. The influencer economy now shapes how some of our institutions raise money and decide who speaks in the name of the community.

Consider the World Zionist Congress, founded by Theodor Herzl. This 129-year-old organization directs more than a billion dollars annually to institutions throughout Israel and the Diaspora. Its 2025 elections drew a surge of social media influencers onto competing slates, some of whom are now delegates. In this strange arrangement, the people whose main qualification is their number of Instagram followers now help direct where the community's money goes, including, at times, to organizations that pay them to speak. Some of these personalities, represented by agents who drive the market, charge exorbitant speaking fees. The case for paying them is that a famous face fills a room, and, typically, the influencer is contracted to promote the organization to his or her own audience, thereby marketing a nonprofit to eyeballs it could never reach on its own.

But would the room be emptier and the checks smaller if the person at the podium were a Nova hero, a reservist back from his 10th tour, or a struggling farmer from the Gaza Envelope? If the donors in the room could see the line item on the invoice for what the influencer was paid, would they write the next check?



The attention economy and communal authority pull in opposite directions. The attention market rewards speed and provocation,

while communal authority leans on the opposite qualities: being credible, dignified, and strategic. When we lose sight of our priorities, burned homes become mere scenery.

What makes the Kfar Aza photo so enduring for me is the part that does not appear. The banner on the wall states: “Yotam Haim was kidnapped from this house.” Yotam Haim was a 28-year-old drummer. Hamas abducted him on October 7. Seventy days later, on December 15, he and two other hostages, Alon Shamriz and Samer Fouad Al-Talalka, escaped captivity only to be tragically shot by Israeli soldiers who mistook them for enemy fighters. Haim died three days before the dancer struck a pose in the ruins of his home. The day she posted the photo, his family was burying him. The banner over her shoulder had already ceased to be a plea and had become an epitaph. Her caption does not mention his name.

This is the social media machine doing exactly what it was built to do. It’s not the lapse of one oblivious influencer. Social media has decentralized the distribution of information and granted that privilege to a class of models, reality-television stars, and pranksters in place of the serious journalists, analysts, and historians who once were the gatekeepers. The most prominent among our new communicators have mastered the art of dialing up whatever the algorithm rewards, which helps explain how another prominent influencer came to bracket two Instagram Stories of herself in a pink bikini around a grieving reaction video to a shooting in Midtown Manhattan that claimed four lives, including Wesley LePatner and Julia Hyman. Once you start to notice the influence machine at work, you can trace its harmful impact on our own interests.



I’m not sure what the greatest casualty of this landscape is—

dignity, credibility, or truth—but the competition is close. One aspiring influencer trades on a handful of television hits to present herself as a journalist while also, oddly, promoting her public relations firm. Her feed is filled with recycled breaking news offered as her own reporting, mixed with plugs for kosher grocery stores. As Israel and Iran traded fire in June, she posted: “Just in: Isreal [*sic*] Airplane attacking in Iran, explosions reported across parts of Tehran, says Mehr News Agency.” A publicist cosplaying as a journalist who misspells “Israel” and sources her “scoops” from the Iranian government is not the ideal personality that the pro-Israel community should bolster to disseminate information online.

A trendy genre of influ-tainment is the “gotcha” clip. Those who traffic in this technique approach unwitting strangers with basic questions about the conflict, expose their ignorance, and humiliate them. In one video, a popular peddler exposes that anti-Israel activists don’t even know that Israel withdrew from Gaza long before October 7. Exasperated, he concludes the segment by educating his audience that Israel, in fact, withdrew from Gaza in 2006. The problem here is that Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. A small and forgivable mistake to be sure, but one that someone purporting to be the history police cannot afford to make.

The instinct to maximize the humiliation inevitably slides seamlessly into cruelty. One certified personal trainer has increased her Instagram following on a feed that splices fitness content and tender family moments with combative commentary. In one clip from July 2025, when claims of a famine in Gaza were rampant, she narrates a video showing a heavysset Gazan as proof that the hunger is staged. She announces to her followers that he is “the size of me and my husband put together, and I have access to a grocery store and a shopper that will bring me my groceries.” If our first line of defense against claims of famine is a body-shaming roast from a personal trainer, it’s no sur-

prise that we're losing the media war. That her audience is primarily pro-Israel doesn't make it any better. The belittling of human suffering in the middle of a just war only serves to harden the people cheering her on, dragging everyone a little further from the values our people are meant to uphold.

The commercial commodification of it all is difficult to ignore or escape. In March 2024, the dance influencer from the Kfar Aza photo published a video featuring Raz Ben Ami, a freed hostage whose husband Ohad was still in captivity. The video opens with a familiar type of hostage testimony and closes as a commercial for Fré Skincare, with everyone shouting "We love Fré!" The testimony and sales pitch are packed into a single frame.

And still, nothing quite competes with the shiva selfie, in which a creator films other people's grief for clicks. After the IDF confirmed that Omer Neutra had been killed near the Gaza border on October 7, his parents sat in mourning near their Long Island home. A self-described "self-worth coach" had herself filmed paying her respects. This "candid" encounter transformed grieving parents into props. The influencer broadcast her visit during a family's worst possible week. I understand how this post benefits the influencer, but how does it benefit the Neutras?



I know this media machine from the inside. In the immediate aftermath of October 7, I joined a group of PR professionals to help U.S. journalists connect with Israeli families of victims and hostages. In responding to horrific atrocities that included sexual assault and gruesome methods of murder, we faced scores of judgment calls that forced us to pit an individual's dignity against the need to expose the war crimes committed against Israelis. We were not perfect by any means,

but we always deferred to a family's wishes, even when it meant not bringing an important story to light. In the summer of 2024, a family whose loved one was still in Gaza captivity came to us in distress. An influencer was about to publish a video of her choreographed performance based on the hostage's plight, and the family had asked, reasonably, to review it first. They confided in us that Israeli officials had advised them to keep quiet because a hostage-release deal was imminent. The influencer refused, saying it was her right and that an Israeli organization that works with hostage families had approved it. Was the influencer within her rights to publish? Sure. Did she internalize the family's wishes or feel a sense of responsibility to them and their captive relative? Evidently not. We tried to step in, and she posted it anyway.

This is where the influencer infatuation ends up: Yotam Haim could not object; the Neutras were never asked; the hostage family we spoke with begged and was denied.

And for all of it, you lose anyway. Israel critics Gigi and Bella Hadid have tens of millions more followers than any plausible roster of pro-Israel creators, and the gap only widens as you zoom out. The numbers war is lost before it begins. Trying to out-influence Israel's online antagonists is expensive and self-abasing. This is not to say that the pro-Israel community should abandon social media entirely, but it should resist letting it become the main event both on and off our screens.

None of this seems to help Israel. Nevertheless, official IDF and Israeli-government social media channels have also adopted the cheap engagement of snark, memes, and influencer content. And when you consider the investments in this space, you must factor in the returns on those investments. In April 2026, the Israeli government voted to nearly quintuple its public-diplomacy budget, to \$730 million, with Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar arguing that it should

be funded like “jets, bombs, and missile interceptors.” The following month, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir posted a video to X and Instagram of himself walking among detained activists from a Gaza flotilla, their hands bound and their faces pressed against the floor. In the clip, Ben-Gvir waves an Israeli flag over them. U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee remarked that Ben-Gvir’s video, which was widely covered by news organizations around the world, had “betrayed the dignity of his nation.”

No campaign, at any budget, outruns that.

Since October 7, I think, often, of those who will never trend online. I have watched dozens of friends and strangers do extraordinary things with no audience at all. They have donated bomb shelters for kindergartens and bought plane tickets for reservists rushing back to defend their communities. I know a family covering the Israeli university tuition of a foreign worker gravely wounded on October 7. There’s the father who held the safe-room handle while terrorists yanked at it from the other side, the medic who ran toward the gunfire, the reservist’s wife raising their kids alone for months. Their credibility comes from sacrifice rather than clicks, and no influencer can buy or borrow that. The family that begged to screen a video first was not asking for much, just to be treated as people rather than material.

And the stakes could not be higher. American support for Israel has fallen to the lowest level that Gallup has recorded in 25 years, and for the first time, Americans say they sympathize more with the Palestinians than with Israel. Among adults younger than 35, only 23 percent say they sympathize more with Israelis, the lowest figure on record for this age group. The online generation has formed its understanding of this war and of Israel on the same platforms that we have flooded with vanity and trolls, and what we are doing there is not working.

Underneath the challenge sits a fear, conveyed to me in private by

older and younger community leaders alike, that our institutions are too formal, too wordy, and too old to speak to young people in their language. The fear is understandable, but it should not translate into handing the microphone to dopamine dealers. The fix is not simple and ultimately comes down to a dedicated effort to change our community's culture. Jewish organizations need to remember that influencers are vendors, not sages, and treat them accordingly. The leadership should also collaborate on setting communal limits on honoraria and insist that Jewish nonprofits publish a set of principles that clearly outlines criteria for social media influencers they support. We should put scholars and inspiring heroes back at the center and also commission projects from leading researchers and historians to gather and preserve more October 7 testimony that will still matter when this week's outrage is forgotten.



We know from our people's history that honest criticism of our own, and of ourselves, is a form of preservation. We engage every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in *Cheshbon Hanefesh* (moral introspection) as a way to improve ourselves for the year to come. We owe our souls and our future that much, if only to stop acting against our own interests.

The October 7 atrocities forced the Diaspora community to step up in unprecedented ways. We raised staggering sums, mobilized volunteers, and found courage we did not know we had. That should not be cheapened by a parallel culture that turns Jewish anguish into personal capital. We survive as a people because we learn to remember, but today's media culture has us hooked on a medium designed to make us forget. The question for American Jewish leadership turns out to be a simple one. Go back one last time to the burned house in Kfar Aza,

to Yossi Landau with his eyes closed and the banner bearing the name of a man already gone, and to the influencer posing in the foreground. Which of them should be the center of the frame? *

AARON KAPLOWITZ is the CEO of Lede Global Inc. and the founder of 1948 Ventures.