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Heartbroken by Israel



Image by mohammed al bardawil.

Long ago, I came to believe that being a Jew, even a secular one like me, entailed certain responsibilities. A people who had suffered so much yet survived were obligated, if not honored, to serve as witnesses and supporters of other oppressed people and to live in the public interest, to model ethical lives. Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk, and Sandy Koufax all made me proud, while I felt ashamed of Roy Cohn, Alan Dershowitz, and Henry Kissinger.

I never reached such lofty, self-righteous, or even chauvinistic heights or depths, but such figures, positive and negative, offered a comforting structure for my casual, shallow life as a Jew. I rarely observed high holy days. My children were neither bar nor bat mitzvahed. I have lived in a space somewhere between my immigrant grandmother's anxious response

to all current events — “Is it good or bad for the Jews?” — and my father’s snarky yet philosophical “Judaism would be a great religion if you got God out of it.” In my overall indifference to my Jewishness and my unsureness about what it meant to me lay, I thought, a kind of worldliness and emotional integrity. It was enough to attempt to live a decent life, be a sportswriter for the *New York Times*, write books for adults and children, try my best to do some good works.

Then October 7th arrived. And the response to it.

And soon, I began to wonder what I was so sure that I was unsure about now. With or without God onboard, what kind of Jew must I be right *now*, as Israelis valiantly defended their homeland and at the same time committed war crimes in my name, while the very words Israeli and Jew were fused in the public conversation?

What could anyone like me do in such circumstances to slow such a horrific drive toward both the destruction of others and self-destruction, while trying to continue the search for some kind of peace? How could we resolve our complicity as bystanders, whether as high-minded Spinoza-style Jews or the lox-and-bagel versions?

I’ve never thought so hard — or helplessly — about anything as I have recently about what it means to be a Jew. How did so many of us, as secular Jews, get to be where we are right now in a country that itself may be coming apart at the seams? How did we become trapped in a mindset that, whether in the Middle East or here, appears to deny a middle ground? I think of Samson in the bible story, blinded and enslaved by the Philistines in Gaza, still managing to pull the temple down around him. Do we still have the strength?

Immigrants and Refugees

Born in 1938, I grew up in New York City’s borough of Queens in an overwhelmingly Jewish community of middle-class strivers, many of whom were the children of late-nineteenth-century Eastern European immigrants. Their dreams were focused on sending their kids to college and moving to the suburbs. In their nightmares were pogroms in Poland (then fading from their collective memory) and the Holocaust, a horror kept fresh by the refugees from Europe who continued to arrive in our neighborhood throughout the late 1940s.

My neighbors hardly received all of the newcomers with open arms. Many of those Holocaust refugees came from Germany and had the stereotypical supercilious attitude of German Jews toward Eastern European ones. The refugees tended to be better educated, more cultivated, and often, despite their state, soon-to-be better off. (Many had relatives already here who would help them financially, house them, and even include them in

established businesses.) In the America of that moment, the tattooed numbers on so many of their arms weren't necessarily viewed with particular sympathy.

And their new neighbors often asked distinctly rude questions: Why hadn't they resisted the Nazis? Why had they waited so long to leave Europe? It was as if they had decided to be willfully ignorant about how hard it must have been for the refugees to comprehend the way they had been betrayed by their former fellow citizens in Germany and how effective wartime America had been in keeping them out.

I remember as a boy being confused by the antagonism. Weren't we all Jews? I had enough problems with the antisemitism of the few gentiles I knew growing up. That included two Catholic cousins I happily played with in summers upstate until, when I was in sixth grade, they told me we could no longer be friends because I had killed Christ. And the slurs hardly ended there. They were usually thoughtless relics of ingrained bigotry, sometimes from the very teachers, editors, and colleagues who would help me most. I found out that, in some fashion, I could let it pass.

My Jewish education didn't really begin until 1951, after a shotgun bar mitzvah forced by my grandparents. I ended up at a small reform Queens synagogue which was either poor enough or progressive enough to be willing to stage a quickie ceremony for me after only a few months of training in Hebrew. The rabbi, Solomon Landman, insisted that I stay on for confirmation classes. Reluctantly, I agreed and was swept away by his version of Judaism.

The classes were enthralling modern lessons in Jewish pride and accomplishment, highlighting figures ranging from Supreme Court Justices Benjamin Cardozo and Felix Frankfurter to baseball star Hank Greenberg to writers and philosophers like Spinoza to my true hero, Dr. Joseph Goldberger. He was the public health epidemiologist who discovered that pellagra, an often fatal skin disease, was caused by a niacin deficiency. I wanted to start a campaign to rename Vitamin B3, the cure he discovered, Vitamin G.

Ethics and moral decision-making were constant topics for us. We talked about the real meaning of being Jewish, about the importance of accepting responsibility for others, particularly the disadvantaged, about the need for true civil rights and a historical obligation to Black Americans. I was thrilled. The world began to make more sense to me. There was, it seemed, purpose in being a Jew beyond the "people of the book" mantra that always sounded to me like a claim to being a smarter species.

Godless Places

I came to believe that Rabbi Landman had been exiled to that backwater temple because he was so far ahead of his time. If there was a God, He had specifically dispatched the Rabbi to me. I began to look forward ever more eagerly to our weekly meetings. Then, suddenly, he died and my new world closed up. How could God have allowed that to happen? Or had God ever really been there at all?

At 14, I was done with religion. A few years later, Columbia University would prove a fairly godless place, as did the Army. I remember how, one frigid weekend, two other Jewish soldiers and I asked the sergeant in our unit for permission to skip outdoor clean-up duty and celebrate what we described as the holiday of Too Kolt. He consented, but the chaplain's assistant, a Jew, busted us. Too Kolt was just too cute. It became a good, guilt-free story back on New York's Upper West Side. My Jewish education, in other words, had become a joke.

That education took another complicated and fascinating turn when I married into a German-Jewish family, the first refugees I came to know well. The Glasers barely made it to America in 1938 with \$5,000 in cash, four kids, and a mansion's worth of furniture which they stuffed into a small house in Buffalo, New York. My father-in-law Willy, the patriarch, had been a factory owner but all his properties turned out to be in communist East Germany, and in that post-World War II, Cold War era there would be no reparations. Nonetheless, over the years he managed to acquire and operate a thriving downtown photo studio and own apartments in Buffalo's Black ghetto. He took me along once to collect rents from his "chocolates," as he called his tenants, people he treated with a patriarchal affection that grated on the son of New York City public school teachers who had worked in Black schools.

After picking up the rents, mostly in cash, we went home for schnapps and reminiscences. Willy had been a corporal in the German Army in World War I — he showed me a depression in his thigh where he had taken a bullet for the Kaiser — and he remained regretful that he had never become an officer, despite his wealth and standing, because he was a Jew. He blamed jealous superiors. (If only the generals knew how he had been discriminated against!)

Believe it or not, he had expected better treatment by Hitler's government. That man, Willy told me, had some good ideas for Germany. And he had expected Hitler to come to his senses on his urge to destroy Jews, but instead, of course, the Glasers had to flee with my future wife in her mother's belly.

Willy fit easily enough into my old neighborhood's stereotype of the German Jew. On paper, he was a white colonial and a slum landlord who found positives in Hitler. Still, I grew fond of him. The world, I realized, was more complicated than I had been led to believe. As it turned out, Willy and I stayed in touch longer than I did with his daughter.

By that time, the early 1960s, we were beginning to truly grasp the horrors of the Holocaust, not to speak of both the idealism and the political conniving that led to the creation of Israel. In some minds now, Zionism and British colonialism are simply lumped together as a pragmatic combination that solved "the Jewish problem," while letting the Arabs pick up the bill. But that's indicative of the ideological simple-mindedness that muddies this issue today. In the wake of World War II, the Jews needed a safe place to live, something they had never had, and Israel became a dream of survival.

At the same time, it wasn't understood in this country that Palestinian Arabs weren't just Indians to be subdued for the sake of the settlers (as in a John Wayne cowboy movie of the 1950s). Everyone, not just Jews, deserved the promise of "never again." That still seems to be a hard sell with so many in this country and it doesn't help that the most vocal advocates for Palestinian equality are often uncompromising young ideologues pitched against billionaire Israel lobbyists and Jews who are for Donald Trump because he's supposedly on Israel's side.

As for me, I visited Israel just once, some 20 years ago, reporting on an opera program for the *New York Times*. Except for airport security, I found everybody I met to be nice. I got greater insight from hearing about the trip my wife Lois Morris took there in 1973 as a travel writer. An Arab waiter followed her from the hotel restaurant and accosted her at the door to her room. A friend of hers appeared. They fought him off and reported him. After she identified the waiter, he was led away and she was told no statement would be necessary. Her word over his was sufficient. He would be in jail for at least six weeks. Almost 60 years ago, she was trapped in our same Israel conundrum — upset by the attack and appalled that the attacker had no rights in that country.

A World of Thugs and Vandals

In 1978, a quarter-century after my rabbi died, I was still raging over my deadbeat God, this time from a room at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. When a staff rabbi walked in to offer religious comfort, I threw him out, asking where this God of his had been while I was getting sick. In a fit of *carcinoma bravado*, I later wrote about the incident, including a gratuitous shout-out to a street gang, the Jewish Defense League: "If

we're going to have thugs and crazies who vandalize synagogues then we might as well have some who vandalize the vandals."

Reading that in print was the start of my own experience of waking up. What, I thought, was I saying? Was I taking my cues from the thugs? Are they our teachers? Is that what happens in desperate times?

I was struggling with such thoughts when a letter arrived from Rabbi Alvin Kass, who had been a college classmate of mine, although we didn't know each other then. Al had led a major conservative synagogue in Brooklyn and was the New York Police Department's Jewish chaplain. (He's head chaplain now.) In response to my piece, he gently wrote: "There is more to being Jewish than being categorized as such by a hostile world."

I accepted his offer to meet and talk. We became friends. Over more than 40 years he's joined Rabbi Landman as my spiritual advisor, officiating at my wedding, while offering rational possibilities in chaotic times. Of course, given the world we're in, we've been talking far more urgently of late. Yes, Hamas are thugs and vandals, but how is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu any different in his behavior?

The truth is we shouldn't have to choose between them. It's important to get rid of them both, while, at least in our thinking, separating two power-mad and murderous ruling bodies from their people, most of whom just want peace. How can we use the "ethical monotheism" of Judaism to find common ground and a country for each? We don't have that answer and don't even know if it's possible, but at least we should know what the only true goal is: to end the present horror. And that would be good for the Jews, with or without God.

This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).

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