

## ISRAEL AT WAR

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## NEWS &amp; POLITICS

## The DEI Complex Will Never Protect Jews

The problem isn't that the system—of affinity groups, diversity officers, microaggression policing, and more—hasn't included Jews until now. It's that the system itself is dangerous.

BY ARMIN ROSEN

**T**he vast diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) complex has sucked away incalculable sums of money and institutional energy and now all but defines the purpose of American higher education. For this industry to overlook the needs and anxieties of Jewish students during the toughest times they've ever faced would invite hard questions about what campus DEI is even for. Surely, there's no way the DEI establishment, a former oddity of higher education that rose to shape the morals, sentiments, and business models of the mainstream corporate, entertainment, and cultural world—would botch something so simple as providing basic moral or rhetorical support to a besieged minority group when the stakes are this high. If the DEI officers' hearts aren't in it—Jews being rich white people whose near ancestors just

happened to have been the Nazis' chief targets—they could at least feign a strategic interest in Jews, thus protecting themselves from future accusations of willful neglect.

Young Jews have never felt more alone on American campuses as they have during these past two weeks. Classmates and soon-to-be-former friends have rallied in large numbers to celebrate the burning and torture of 1,400 Israelis. Professors have announced

## COLLECTION

**Hamas' War on Israel**

All of Tablet's coverage of the October 2023 attack on Israel and the world's response.

[tabletmag.com/collections/hamas-israel](https://tabletmag.com/collections/hamas-israel)

their glee at the redemptive spilling of settler blood. University administrators who treat every scratch of racist graffiti as a kind of communitywide soul-murder have discovered a newfound sense of nuance when faced with the 21st century's worst butchery of Jews.

The nation's army of campus DEI staff presumably exists for moments like this one, where an already unpopular minority group confronts an unanticipated surge of stress and potential danger. Yet DEI offices haven't even bothered with pro forma expressions of fake concern. This week, I called or emailed over a dozen equity divisions at prominent colleges and universities to ask whether they had released any statements, held any events, or created any new programming for Jewish students since the Hamas rampage of October 7 and the wave of campus unrest that followed. The answer is no—of course not.

The fact Jews put their names on buildings and otherwise lavishly support many of these institutions apparently makes no difference to DEI bureaucrats. For example, I received no response from any of the diversity czars at the University of Pennsylvania, where internal dissension over the administration's refusal to condemn the Hamas attack has already cost the most Jewish of Ivies hundreds of millions in pledged funding.

One of the few responses I did receive came from the University of Michigan—which makes sense, since according to a 2021 Heritage Foundation report, the school had 163 DEI employees, the most in the nation. A representative of the university directed me to two statements from Santa J. Ono, the school's president. Neither announcement made any specific mention of Jews, while the list of "support resources" appended to each press release did not include any service that the university Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion was itself offering. Which is as clear an answer as one might ask for, I guess.

The City University of New York might have just purged the final Jews from the institution's 80-member senior leadership team, but a staffer still helpfully pointed me toward two post-attack statements from Chancellor Felix Matos

**"If the DEI offices' hearts aren't in it—they could at least feign a strategic interest in Jews, thus protecting themselves from future accusations of willful neglect."**

Rodriguez. His short concern-blurbs from October 7 and 9 deserve credit for naming Hamas as the perpetrator of the violence that set off this latest round of war. Still, the latter statement contains a startling admission that CUNY campuses have become an incubator of sympathy and justification for some of the darkest acts imaginable. "We want to be clear that we don't condone the activities of any internal organizations that are sponsoring rallies to celebrate or support Hamas' cowardly actions," Rodriguez wrote in anticipation of these exact events. "Such efforts do not in any way represent the University and its campuses" he continued—a suggestion that according to his own statement is clearly false.

George Washington University, the site of an act of vandalism against a Torah in 2021, is so serious about social justice on campus that the website of its Office for Diversity, Equity, and Community Engagement puts a self-flagellating land acknowledgement at the very top of the page: "We acknowledge the truth that is often buried: We here in the D.C. area are on the ancestral homelands of the Piscataway, Anacostan, and Nacotchtank Peoples, who were among the first in the Western Hemisphere. We are on Indigenous land that was stolen from the Piscataway, Anacostan,

and Nacotchtank. We pay respects to the Piscataway, Anacostan, and Nacotchtank elders and ancestors. Please take a moment to consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that inform and impact us all."

Impressive, no doubt. Yet the university's equity bureaucrats apparently did not take a moment to consider the plight of Jewish students horrified at the butchery in Israel and the celebration it provoked among their peers. When asked what that office itself did the week of October 7, I was directed toward two statements from university President Ellen M. Granberg—who, I should add, deserves credit for being one of the very few in higher education to describe the Hamas attack in appropriate moral terms. "We know there is a long and complex history associated with this conflict," she wrote. "Still, this does not justify the evil we have collectively witnessed."

Given the dearth of replies by either phone or email, it became necessary to look through Twitter feeds, event schedules, and recent announcements on the universities' DEI pages in order to ascertain their level of activity in response

 **PODCAST**



**Ep. 16: The Age of Apocalypse**

This week, Walter and Jeremy discuss Biden's Oval Office address, Iranian attacks on U.S. targets in the Middle East, attacks on synagogues in Europe and North Africa, and why people who hate America and capitalism also hate Israel

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## COLLECTION

### The WASPs Funding Antisemitism

In the wake of the October 2023 Hamas attacks, Jewish leaders were shocked to read the egregious statement put out by Darren Walker, the President of the Ford Foundation, who declined to acknowledge the massacre of Jews in Israel. They shouldn't have been—not only because the foundation's namesake was a notorious antisemite, but because the Ford Foundation is at the center of an elite nonprofit complex fueling this crisis both at home and abroad. In addition to the major nonprofit foundations, the American establishment remains dominant in two other areas of life: elite prep schools and universities, and the "deep state." It's not a coincidence that these three sectors—NGOs, higher ed, and the federal bureaucracy—have become the power centers of wokeness. The face of "resistance" may be a young radical, but the funding, strategy, and power are decidedly not. On Sunday night, Walker issued a second press release. With no explanation given, it was not clear why two statements were released. "Henry Ford, our founder, was among the twentieth century's most virulent American antisemites. And yet, to me, our past confers a special obligation to engage, not to retreat—no matter the complications or the consequences."

[tabletmag.com/collections/wasp-funding-woke-antisemitism](https://tabletmag.com/collections/wasp-funding-woke-antisemitism)

to the worst crisis Jewish college students have faced lately. On Oct. 18, the Twitter feed of the Rutgers University Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community posted a pair of graphics about "meeting the moment with humanity." In one of them, the #RUWorkforinclusion hashtag appeared below a quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was once one of the world's leading opponents of the existence of the State of Israel. The office did not put out any

statement in the immediate wake of the October 7 assault, although it did host a webinar on "micro-inequities" on Oct. 17. Presumably, even according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the mass slaughter of Israelis might qualify at least as a "micro-inequity." However there was no sign Jewish students were particularly encouraged to attend that or any other Rutgers DEI event.

Not to be outdone by its less rarefied rival to the north, the University of Virginia's Division for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion held events on microaggressions on both Oct. 17 and Oct. 18. Those who missed "I Felt That: Intro Microaggressions" must have been a little lost at "I Felt That: Microaggressions—The Remix (Intermediate)" the following night. The idea that the survivors of the Hamas massacre and their fellow Jews on campus might have also felt something worth recognizing was nowhere in evidence.

The University of North Carolina saw a faceoff between mourners and celebrants of the Hamas attack that nearly turned violent. Jewish students and their campus allies—assuming they have any—might have looked at the resistance enthusiasts in their midst and wondered in horror at exactly who they'd been going to school with. If they'd looked at the University Office for Diversity and Inclusion's web page, they'd have found an infographic about "inclusive excellence."

Nobody picked up the phone when I called Michigan State University's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, whose website includes handy and potentially disgrace-preventing instructions on how not to botch a land acknowledgement ritual. "Although land acknowledgements are powerful statements," the guide reads in boldface type, "they are only meaningful when they are coupled with authentic and sustained relationships with Indigenous communities and community-informed actions." Those of a Talmudic cast will be intrigued to learn that there is both an official land acknowledgement for Michigan State University and a shortened land acknowledgement for Michigan State University that satisfies the rigors of equity Halacha. No one at the school's DEI office seems to be acknowledging

the turmoil of the university's Jewish students, though.

For the past two weeks, DEI offices have had a chance to show they can be responsive to the real-life needs of young people facing a scary and unfamiliar crisis. But these offices clearly do not exist to serve Jews, or wish to recognize Jews might be capable of feeling pain, even when their friends and co-religionists have been slaughtered en masse. That's because DEI bureaucracies don't exist to serve actually existing people of any background. The purpose they serve is a theological one, and dogma enforcement is a big part of what universities do these days. The aforementioned Heritage study found that in the aggregate, there were 1.4 times as many DEI staff as history professors across the 65 institutions surveyed. "Promoting DEI has become a primary function of higher education," the report observed.

An equity office's job is to engineer the values of the rising elite so that DEI and the wider ideological edifice it serves will remain powerful, protected, and even feared. These bureaucracies are not burning through institutional capital in order to salve the anxieties of Jewish students, because helping students was never the point. Their ambitions are of a different order: DEI embodies the moral authority of a larger system for distributing status and power. It doesn't care about actual human beings—and as we've learned since the massacre of October 7, it especially doesn't care about Jews. ■

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## THE REST

→ **The U.N. refugee agency for Palestinians, several of whose employees cheered Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, is claiming that it will have to stop delivering humanitarian aid unless Israel agrees to provide fuel to Gaza**, just weeks after announcing that Hamas was stealing fuel and medical equipment from the agency's compound in a since-deleted X post. UNRWA, which received \$344 million in funding from the United States in 2022 and is known to employ Hamas members and sympathizers, said on Wednesday that it will be forced to cease operations if it does not receive more fuel immediately. Israel is currently allowing the delivery of food, water, and medicine to Gaza but draws the line at fuel, which it fears will be diverted to support Hamas' war effort. On Tuesday, in response to claims from Hamas and Al Jazeera that the Israeli fuel blockade was preventing Gazan hospitals from operating, the IDF released photos of fuel tanks in Gaza containing what it claimed were half a million liters of fuel—enough to keep every hospital in the territory operating for days.

→ **Senior White House officials have been leading ethnically segregated "listening sessions" to reassure staffers that they are "supported,"** according to a report in Politico. The news follows several reports in the Huffington Post last week about White House, diplomatic, and national security staffers feeling "stifled" by the Biden administration's public support for Israel, with one administration official blaming Biden's stance on the fact that his inner circle is "not at all diverse." To address these very grave concerns, the White House has in recent days held separate small-group listening sessions for Jewish staffers and Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian staffers, as well as several larger meetings "featuring in-depth discussions about the crisis and its effect on aides' lives."

→ **An overwhelming majority of Israeli Arabs oppose Hamas' attacks on Israel, according to a recent poll.** An Oct. 10 survey found that 80% of Israeli Arabs oppose the attacks, 85% oppose Hamas' kidnapping of civilians, 66% support Israel's right to defend itself, and 50% believe the attacks were "contrary to the values of Islam." Arabs make up about 21% of Israel's population, and at least 18 Israeli Arabs were killed in the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks. The attitude of Israeli Arabs, the vast majority of whom are Muslim, stands in stark contrast to the attitude of young Americans. According to an Oct. 23 Harvard/Harris poll, 51% of Americans aged 18-24 and 48% of those aged 25-34 believe the Hamas attacks "can be justified by the grievances of Palestinians."

→ **Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah hosted leaders from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Beirut on Wednesday to trumpet continuing coordination between the different branches of the Iran-backed "Axis of Resistance,"** according to a report in Lebanese media. Nasrallah met with Hamas Politburo head Saleh al-Arouri and PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah to discuss "what the parties of the Axis of Resistance must do ... to realize a real victory for the resistance in Gaza and Palestin[e] and to halt the brutal aggression [of Israel]," according to the report from pro-Iran Al-Mayadeen Media Network. The report went on to say that the leaders had agreed to hold follow-up discussions "on a daily or permanent basis." Nasrallah also announced, in his first public statement since Oct. 7, that the Hezbollah fighters killed in recent clashes with Israeli forces must be seen as "martyrs." The group's fatalities rose to 39 on Wednesday, after two more Hezbollah fighters were confirmed killed by the IDF.

## THE BIG STORY

Remember last week, when several Western publications, including *The New York Times*, BBC, and *The Wall Street Journal*, ran with claims sourced from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Ministry of Health about an Israeli airstrike on Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City that had allegedly killed more than 500 civilians? Yes, we know: That story fell apart within about 12 hours. Yes, *The New York Times* issued an editors' note admitting that its reporting "relied too heavily on claims by Hamas, and did not make clear that those claims could not immediately be verified." And yes, the IDF's claims about the explosion—that it was the result of a misfired Palestinian rocket—have since been backed by U.S. intelligence assessments, open-source investigators, and independent analyses by news organizations such as CNN and the AP.

Don't tell any of that to Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), however. The congresswoman repeated the hospital bombing story at an anti-Israel rally at the U.S. Capitol, nearly a full 24 hours after the rest of the world had discovered that the initial version of the story was either fake or disputed in every significant detail: The hospital wasn't hit, but a parking lot adjacent to it was; not as many as 500 people were killed, but far fewer were, by some estimates fewer than 100; finally, an Israeli airstrike didn't cause the explosion, but most likely a misfired Palestinian rocket did.

—Jacob Siegel

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# The George Kennan Who Wasn't

A startling string of policy failures shows the hollowness of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and its servile wunderkind, Jake Sullivan

BY JEREMY STERN

Peering through the clouds of vapor emitting from U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's various profilers and character witnesses over the years, here is what we learn: Sullivan is a "once-in-a-generation intellect," according to Joe Biden, and a "once-in-a-generation talent," "a potential future president," according to Hillary Clinton. "The sky's the limit," says former Deputy Secretary of State and Brookings Institution President Strobe Talbott. "He is somebody of extraordinary intelligence and temperament." Sullivan has an admirable "habit of continually questioning his own assumptions" and a "methodical, hyper-analytical style." He is "a genuinely nice guy" and "a good human being" with a "self-deprecating Midwestern modesty" who is a "really good listener" and "loved by everyone."

Sullivan's path to power is indeed impressive, from middle-class Minneapolis public school student to Yale graduate, Rhodes scholar, Supreme Court clerk, aide to the presidents of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution, chief counsel to the senior senator from Minnesota, adviser to the presidential campaigns of both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, deputy chief of staff to the secretary of state, director of policy planning, national security advisor to the vice president, and finally, United States national security advisor—all before his 45th birthday. Such a meteoric rise to power indeed begs explanation, even for a coxswain of the Yale lightweight crew team.

There are two revealing anecdotes, often repeated in the creation of the Sullivan legend, which are meant to illuminate his dizzying ascent. The first is from June 2009, when President Obama pushed for the ouster of a member of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's policy planning staff who had asked Jack Dorsey to delay scheduled maintenance of Twitter because members of Iran's Green Movement depended on it for communication. In a meeting with Obama and White House and State Department officials, Clinton reportedly stood by her staffer and Iran's anti-regime movement against the wishes of Obama, who claimed, implausibly, that he didn't want to harm the protesters' cause by appearing to interfere in Iran's domestic politics.

One of the aides present at the meeting was Sullivan, then Clinton's deputy chief of staff. In "one of the rare occasions when Sullivan and Clinton diverged," according to a Vox profile, Sullivan supported Obama's position over that of Clinton, his boss. Readers of the profile are meant to come away with an appreciation for Sullivan's independence of spirit, which he apparently showed by taking the side of the president of the United States. The supposed risk he assumed in dissenting from Clinton's support for the Iranian protesters was rewarded shortly thereafter, when Obama entrusted Sullivan with conducting secret meetings with the Iranian government, culminating in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal.

The second anecdote concerns a trip

Sullivan took to Myanmar in late 2012. During a lunch Obama hosted there for Clinton and her staff, the president reportedly turned to Sullivan—by then director of policy planning—for a brief history of the country. "I don't know a whole lot," Sullivan began," according to *Foreign Policy*, "before launching into a virtual dissertation on the topic—something colleagues say they've seen him do dozens of times on any number of subjects. A few weeks later, Obama asked Sullivan to replace [Antony] Blinken as then-Vice President Biden's national security advisor." (This is considered a promotion.)

This latter story is especially interesting, because once Sullivan joined Obama's inner circle in early 2013, the administration would go on to devote extraordinary attention to Myanmar on the fantasy that Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and endured 15 years of house arrest, was in the process of taking power from a defeated military junta. In reality, the military was not allowing Suu Kyi to lead a "democratic transition," as the Obama administration insisted. Instead, it used Western human rights fantasies to attract foreign investment before murdering tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims and driving hundreds of thousands more into Bangladesh.

Eight years later, shortly after Sullivan became national security advisor, the Biden administration imposed sanctions on Myanmar, driving the Burmese junta closer to China even as it drove Narendra Modi's India—a fellow recipient of human rights censure from the Biden White House—further away from the United States, which in chess terms is the equivalent of exchanging a bishop for a pawn, and then losing the pawn. Myanmar was then pointedly excluded from Biden's 2021 Summit for Democracy, to which Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were invited "to stand together in defending against threats from autocracies."

All of which makes one wonder what exactly the young Jake Sullivan said about Myanmar that so impressed Barack Obama (whom it is difficult to imagine suffering a dewy Clinton staffer's "virtual dissertation" on the

## ALSO IN TABLET THIS WEEK

### The Protests of Fools

Demonstrators in the streets of Paris once chanted ‘We are all Jews.’ Today they cheer on Jewish slaughter.

BY BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

### Netanyahu’s Deal With Putin Goes Wrong

Is Ukraine the winner?

BY VLADISLAV DAVIDZON

### America Needs a Decisive Israeli Victory

That means destroying Hezbollah and striking Iran. Anything less is a major strategic defeat for Israel and the U.S.

BY RAPHAEL BENLEVI

### America’s Democratic Socialists Loved Israel

For decades, the DSA and its predecessors, and socialist leaders like Michael Harrington and Bayard Rustin, championed the Jewish state and defened Jews on campus. In 2017, the DSA embraced Jew-hatred.

BY MICHAEL BERNICK

### Sitting Shiva, Far From Home

Saar Margolis was born on Kibbutz Kissufim. On October 7, he was killed there, defending the kibbutz against Hamas terrorists. But his family, evacuated to a hotel near the Dead Sea, had to mourn him in an unfamiliar place.

BY HILLEL KUTTLER



country), and which made such an impression on his colleagues that they’ve been repeating the story and others like it to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, Politico, Vox, and *Foreign Policy* ever since. To find out what he actually said, I thought, might provide a key to understanding why so many of the stories meant to demonstrate Sullivan’s unusual intelligence, competence, and

decency often have the opposite effect of conveying mediocrity and servility.

Alas, no one seems to remember—at least not anyone willing to talk. But there may be a partial answer in the emptiness of the memory itself. Search for any specific instance of leadership, wisdom, good judgment, erudition, originality of thought, or other such qualities in Sullivan’s record, and a diligent reporter will draw a blank.

Surely, if a good example of Jake Sullivan’s qualifications as a 21st-century George Kennan existed, it would have been rushed into print by now. His record includes a rapidly escalating stampede of failures: the botched Afghanistan withdrawal, the failure of deterrence in Ukraine, the failed Ukrainian counteroffensive, the economic war with China, America’s disastrous border policy, and now, decisively, U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran—which enjoyed the financial and diplomatic backing of Biden and Sullivan as it enabled the rape, murder, and kidnapping of thousands of Israeli Jews by a fascist death cult. The failure of the administration’s Iran policy, which Sullivan has shaped and promoted for a decade, has in turn forced Israel into a war of regime change in Gaza, sinking hopes for a peace deal with Saudi Arabia while promising to fill Vladimir Putin’s coffers with spiking oil prices. It is arguably the most rapid-fire set of American foreign policy failures on record, and their handmaiden, if not their author, in each and every case, was Sullivan.

Of course, it’s the president who decides foreign policy, not the national security advisor, who is merely responsible for formulating it and managing its implementation. “He can guide [the president], but he can’t contradict him,” as one former colleague put it to *The New Yorker* recently. “That’s what a national-security advisor has to do, and Jake has always been very conscious, like frankly any good Washington staffer, of never getting afoul of his principal, and he never does.”

In a 2020 Politico profile, “The inexorable rise of Jake Sullivan,” a Yale roommate who somehow surmounted the obstacle of being named Sherlock Grigsby

recalled that he “challenged Jake once to see who could finish *Eichmann in Jerusalem* first ... Turns out he beat me easily. I didn’t challenge him after that.” There is more. One day in Obama’s first term, Clinton aide Philippe Reines was sitting in a yurt in Mongolia, certain he’d secured the coveted distinction of traveling to 111 countries with the secretary of state, more than any other staffer. But suddenly, out of nowhere, in walked Sullivan, who had “literally just been in Oman for secret peace talks with the Iranians, and he managed to make it to this remote part of Mongolia. So in the end he’s the only human being who went to 112 countries with Hillary. His capacity for work is just that annoying.”

During the Trump years, when he wasn’t advising Microsoft and Uber, Sullivan spent his time out of power investigating why the Democrats’ “lofty economic vision wasn’t connecting with Americans back home.” “He began thinking about how all the cogs and wheels of the international system, from international organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) to global supply chains, were all connected,” according to Elise Labott of *Foreign Policy*. “And he started pulling on the thread.”

It presumably wasn’t Labott’s intention to portray Sullivan as a man tugging on a thread caught in the teeth of cogs in a wheel, but her mixed metaphor was more apt than she probably knew. Over the next two years, Sullivan formed a “task force” at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to find out what normal Americans wanted out of U.S. foreign policy. The result was “Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class,” a 90-page lulu of vapid poser iconoclasm in which the American middle class is depicted not as a group of hard-working people whose relatively straightforward interests must be satisfied if only because they have the power to throw you out of office, but as an unproductive class of left-behinds whom the “liberal order” must compensate with a mix of green activism and state planning. (Sullivan’s doctrine of a “foreign policy for the middle class” was duly announced as official Biden administration policy in

February of 2021. It has since been re-branded, by Sullivan, as the “New Washington Consensus.”)

As the official in charge of carrying out Biden’s decision to leave Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, according to *The New York Times*, Sullivan impressed all when he “asked many questions about its haste.” While his colleagues might have had the luxury of focusing on one issue at a time, Sullivan “was at the same time responsible for spearheading U.S. policy on everything from cyberattacks and an earthquake in Haiti to terrorist threats.” It was a difficult month, for he “would mull over each long day during late-night walks.” As nearly every profile notes in tones of awe, Sullivan was able to function on very little sleep. Napoleon, too, was like this.

*The New Yorker’s* Susan Glasser, whose function is to retail White House PR for the Nantucket brunch set, came closest to a plausible depiction of “the Democrats’ foreign-policy golden boy” in her own recent profile of Sullivan, who nevertheless emerges again covered in Vaseline. (“One night a few months ago, Sullivan discovered an intruder who had broken into his home at around 3 a.m., because he was still up working.”) According to colleagues, Glasser found, Sullivan “likes to look at every facet of a problem and wants to understand everything,” a virtue which nevertheless reveals “the tragedy of government—you have to make decisions behind a veil of irreducible ignorance.” “He wants a real debate, and he fosters that,” which unfortunately means “that sometimes he can blow in the wind.” But that’s the price of keeping America safe from nuclear war. Sullivan counters with the final word: “You have an obligation to the American people to consider worst-case scenarios. That’s our job.”

As it happened, *The New Yorker* profile arrived just in time to rescue Sullivan from the now-infamous statement he made at the 2023 Atlantic Festival: “The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades,” Sullivan claimed on Sept. 29. “The amount of time that I have to spend on crisis and conflict in the Middle East

“At every step of this deranged foreign policy nightmare, Sullivan has been feted unironically as a wunderkind—the best and the brightest.”

today, compared to any of my predecessors going back to 9/11, is significantly reduced.”

On Oct. 2, however, *Foreign Affairs* went to press with a 7,000-word essay by Sullivan which repeated his statement to *The Atlantic*, in addition to claims such as, “The Israeli-Palestinian situation is tense, particularly in the West Bank, but in the face of serious frictions, we have de-escalated crises in Gaza and restored direct diplomacy between the parties after years of its absence.” (*Foreign Affairs* later scrubbed at least five of Sullivan’s more embarrassing Middle East predictions in the essay’s online version, but not before the original appeared in print.)

Five days later, on Oct. 7, the genocidal regime in Tehran—the recent recipient of \$16 billion in sanctions relief from the White House—drove a murderous wedge between the Sunni Arab states and Israel, turning the Jewish state into the site of pogroms worse than Kristallnacht. Nuclear war isn’t entirely out of the question.

It is not for a journalist (I’m talking about myself now) to insist that there is something morally or intellectually wrong with someone whose political analysis is baldly and repeatedly contradicted by events. But there is clearly something morally and intellectually

wrong with the cult of Jake Sullivan, which in turn suggests a crisis of greater proportions than the abject analytical and geostrategic failures of a single individual.

WFor nearly 15 years, Sullivan has been one of the American officials most responsible for managing and executing the realignment of the United States in the Middle East with the most antisemitic political and military force in the modern world—a revolution in America’s foreign policy posture which along the way has required consent to genocide in Syria, appeasement of Vladimir Putin, cash support for Iran’s expeditionary terror forces, the routine payment of ransom for hostages, the normalization and “regional integration” of Hezbollah and Hamas, the scuttling of Saudi-Israeli peace, the constraining of Israeli military options for enforcing its own red lines, the construction of an Iranian nuclear weapons program under the protective umbrella of a U.S.-backed international agreement, and now, full Israeli mobilization for an existential war.

At every step of this deranged foreign policy nightmare, perpetrated by the richest and most powerful state on earth, Sullivan has been feted unironically by the Washington foreign policy establishment as a wunderkind—the best and the brightest. “What it came down to was a search not for the most talent, the greatest brilliance,” wrote David Halberstam of Sullivan’s unmistakable antecedents in the Kennedy administration, “but for the fewest black marks, the fewest objections. The man who had made the fewest enemies.”

Jake Sullivan’s rise, and the avalanche of bien pensant flattery that has validated disaster after disaster, contrary to every real-world indicator, as marks of genius, is as sure a sign as any that the United States is once again ruled by a vain and arrogant aristocracy that prizes credentials over experience, and prestige over integrity, and which spends its days endlessly gratifying each other. The resulting stench will not soon be forgotten, especially by the people of Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Israel, and other nations, and American servicemen and women, who have already

paid for the horrifically bad judgment of American commanders-in-chief, and of their high-class servants, with their blood.

In his famous history of the origins of the Vietnam War, Halberstam tells the story of Vice President Lyndon Johnson returning from his first cabinet meeting at Camelot with “the new breed of

thinkers-doers, half of academe, half of the nation’s think tanks and of policy planning ... not doubting for a moment the validity of their right to serve, the quality of their experience.” Johnson went to his mentor, Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, “and told him with great enthusiasm how extraordinary they were, each brighter than the next.”

“Well, Lyndon,” Rayburn answered, “you may be right and they may be every bit as intelligent as you say. But I’d feel a whole lot better about them if just one of them had run for sheriff once.” ■

*This article was originally published on October 26, 2023.*

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

# Why Egypt Leaves Palestinians in Gaza to Die

The Jewish state has long been a useful villain in Egyptian conspiracy theories. Now that might be backfiring on Egyptians and Gazans at once.

BY SAMUEL TADROS

**V**iewed from Washington, Hamas’ barbaric attack on Israel must have seemed a gift to the Egyptian regime. Shunned by Washington due to its dismal human rights record, and confronting a serious economic crisis, Egypt’s fortunes were running downhill fast even before federal prosecutors indicted U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez on charges of conspiring to act as a foreign agent for Egypt, putting the prospect of a continuation of the U.S. annual aid to the country in question. With Hamas’ massacre of Israeli civilians, and the certainty of a massive Israeli ground invasion to follow, it seemed like Cairo would once again become a desired partner to bring stability and peace to the region—in return for much-needed financial assistance of course.

Instead, with many innocent Palestinian lives at stake, Egypt has strongly and consistently rejected the opportunity

to play a constructive role in a major regional crisis. Not only has Egypt refused to open the Rafah crossing to allow the evacuation of Americans from Gaza, but it has insisted that under no circumstances would it allow Palestinian civilians to flee to Sinai. U.S. Secretary of State Blinken was also on the receiving end of a bizarre tirade by Egypt’s dictator, President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, who insisted that Jews had never been oppressed in the Middle East. Coming in the aftermath of his humiliation in Saudi Arabia, Secretary Blinken’s ordeal at el-Sissi’s hands must have seemed a good metaphor for the Biden administration’s failure in the Middle East.

While the Biden’s administration’s failed regional policies—from attempting to reach an accommodation with Iran to a general apathy toward the Middle East that has left the region in turmoil—may explain much of the current fiasco, the lack of constructive engagement from Cairo goes much deeper than an expression of hurt by a former partner. In fact,

Cairo’s behavior should not come as a surprise to Washington, at least not if anyone had been paying attention to the country’s politics and internal dynamics for the past decade.

For over 70 years, Egypt’s political and cultural scene has been dominated by antisemitism, not simply as a form of hate but more importantly as an ideology for mass politics and a pillar of a national totalitarian project. The signing of a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 did not weaken this dispensation; rather, it amplified it. Since the Camp David Accords, antisemitism has become a powerful tool of mobilization by the Egyptian opposition across the political spectrum; a means to augment public anger against the Mubarak regime by painting them as traitors. In response, the regime has eagerly exploited and promulgated antisemitism through its propaganda apparatus in order to prove its own bona fides.

The results of the massive validation of antisemitism as a cornerstone of Egyptian political discourse by both regime opponents and supporters are depressingly easy to spot. Successive generations of young Egyptians live in a wildly irrational fantasy world, having been brainwashed from birth with Jew-hatred and conspiracy theories from blood libels and Holocaust denial to sharks in the Red Sea being planted by the Mossad.

The upheaval in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution only intensified this process. With the country in turmoil, it was only natural for people to attempt to explain the unprecedented changes around them by falling back on preestablished notions—namely, a Jewish conspiracy. Qatari and Iranian propaganda arms further kindled those fires with a



flood of fabricated stories about alleged Jewish conspiracies to harm Egypt.

When Sissi removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013, he justified his actions by accusing the Muslim Brotherhood of deviating from Egyptian nationalism and serving its Islamist ideology and foreign interests. In the following months, Egyptians were bombarded with conspiracy theories regarding the Muslim Brotherhood, often involving the United States and Israel. The U.S. Sixth Fleet had attempted to invade Egypt to save the Brotherhood; Egyptian naval forces had defeated them and captured their commander; Hassan El Banna, the founder of the Brotherhood was a secret Jew. President Obama had given the Brotherhood \$8 billion in return for Egypt conceding 40% of Sinai to Hamas so Israel could then take over Gaza.

If the claims sound irrational, it is because they are. But in a country where political forces from left and right cannot agree on anything besides Jew-hatred, and with the state propaganda machine at his disposal, those lunacies all became established facts in Egyptian

politics. Suggestions by Westerners of land swaps to ease the population concentration in Gaza only served as proof of those theories. Not wanting to be outdone, the Muslim Brotherhood has in turn accused President Sissi of being a secret Jew and of approving giving Sinai to the Palestinians as part of President Trump's "deal of the century."

The result is a political climate in which no Egyptian politician can possibly agree to the entry of Palestinians to Sinai. Egypt certainly has legitimate concerns about that suggestion; from fear that Israel would not allow the return of those refugees following the end of hostilities, concerns regarding the financial burden of hosting those refugees, fears of Hamas militants infiltrating the country and mixing with Islamist insurgents in Sinai, and alarm at the prospect of attacks against Israel from Sinai and possible Israeli responses. However, these concerns—most of which are susceptible to rational analysis—are dwarfed by the hysteria and conspiracy theories that frame the conversation about Palestinians and Sinai inside

Egypt. While Egypt is in desperate need of financial assistance, the economic crisis has also made the regime increasingly unsure of the country's stability and fearful of inciting popular resentment.

How much does Sissi himself believe his regime's conspiracy theories? From crushing civil society and independent media because it is utilized as part of a fourth-generation warfare by the West against Egypt, to his repeated statements about conspiracies against the country, Sissi has made it clear throughout his reign that he deeply believes them—and shapes his policies accordingly. And if his tirade to Blinken sounded bizarre, it should hardly have been surprising. After all, in 2015, his regime produced a TV series called the *Jewish Quarter*, which argued exactly as the president did, that Jews had always lived happily in Egypt without any oppression and it was only because of two actors that this imagined utopia came to an end; the Muslim Brotherhood and the Zionists. ■

*This article was originally published on October 20, 2023.*

## COMMUNITY

# Hamas Killed My Wokeness

I've found a home on the progressive left for years—even after I noticed a common blind spot around Jewish issues. But the reaction to the murderous attacks on Israeli civilians was the final straw.

BY ALEX OLSHONSKY

**I**n high school in the early 2000s, I assumed the role of Palestine in our semester-long "Model U.N." class. It was, in part, a feeble act of rebellion against spending weekends at a Conservative synagogue during my angstiest years.

Although my comprehension of the

Middle East conflict was in its infancy, an innate sense of justice drove me to defend the Palestinian cause. To characterize my choice as merely "rebellion," then, doesn't capture the full picture. My mother, a New Yorker with fierce feminist beliefs, raised me with quintessentially progressive Jewish values. I was taught that we, as Jews, stand with

the oppressed—because *we* were the oppressed. This sentiment was often reinforced by my grandparents who arrived in America penniless, the Nazis hounding at their heels.

I took my role seriously, making it my mission to call for an immediate halt to the bulldozing of Palestinian homes in the West Bank and Gaza. I plunged into extensive research and armed myself with the knowledge to effectively champion a two-state solution—a belief I passionately held in high school and continue to endorse today.

Later, as a man in his 20s, it was only natural that I found myself firmly situated within the progressive left. I never once questioned my political home. Guided by my Jewish values, during the George Floyd tragedy and the racial reckoning that followed, I wholeheartedly embraced anti-racism initiatives. I read Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo, and I even took on the role of facilitating international dialogues on

collective sense-making and healing. I strove to be a good “white ally.” Truly, I did.

Then came a flexion point: During a 2021 Bay Area psychotherapy training, in a “processing session” around race, a woman vulnerably shared her firsthand experience with a horrific act of antisemitic hatred. To my astonishment, the two facilitators, both white women, chastised her—yes, chastised—stressing the session’s emphasis on anti-Black racism. This episode unveiled a disconcerting bias in this community that routinely minimized antisemitism, to the point it was no longer considered “legitimate” racism. The young Jewish woman who’d shared was cowed into silence. From within my depths, I could hear my grandfather’s groan from eternity: *This, still, here?*

At that moment, it became clear to me that “wokeness,” or whatever term we may use to describe the new progressive social justice ideology, didn’t seem fully compatible with the perspective I had developed in a family that was very liberal *because* of our lineage of Holocaust survivors.

Since then, I’ve struggled to find my political footing while maintaining a commitment to the pursuit of truth and justice. I started noticing the sinister shadow of postmodern progressivism everywhere: a seeming insistence on “pluralism” that, in practice, often lacks genuine embodiment and quickly devolves into its own form of dogmatic and reductive tribalism.

I began to feel as though I had been baited into an a priori virtuous worldview that, in a twisted way, sows more division than it does healing; more concerned, as it is, with retribution than reconciliation. That my Judaism was utterly swept away (even shadow-demonized) in the context of this conversation only left me more disillusioned.

Yet my affiliation with progressivism persisted. Say what one will about the oversimplifications and occasional insincerities of the progressive left, I told myself, their hearts were in the right place.

Then, two weeks ago, Hamas grotesquely murdered 1,400 Israeli citizens, including 270 at a pro-peace

“Any ideology that ‘justifies’ or minimizes the tragedy of civilian casualties is broken and perverse.”

music festival, a gathering my friends and I would have joyously attended if we were in the Holy Land. While these events were deeply disturbing to me, and all fellow members of the diaspora, what was even more shocking was the response from segments of the online left back home. These are progressive groups that, ostensibly, should cherish *all* human life and abhor *all* wanton violence.

Instead, many celebrated—yes, celebrated—these attacks as a form of “anti-colonialist resistance.” Memes circulated, like the now infamous Chicago #BLM paratrooper, that quite literally glorified an unimaginable slaughtering. Student groups at Harvard decried Israel as “entirely responsible” for Hamas’ attack; groups at the University of Virginia went a step further in saying that “colonized people can resist occupation of their land by whatever means they deem necessary”; and groups at Tufts took the cake by praising Hamas’ ingenious creativity.

The straw that broke my proverbial “progressive” back occurred last Thursday, when students at a high school in the Bay Area, my home for the last 15 years, were seen chanting “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” They marched in the hallways of a public school ringing the jihadist rallying

call that implicitly calls for the erasure of the State of Israel. And all those who *live* within it.

Do these high schoolers, who are the same age I was when I debated on behalf of Palestine in Model U.N., grasp the underlying antisemitic implications of their words? Or might they simply be aligning with a far-left mindset that unreservedly and reductively supports the “oppressed”?

Zooming out, it has become clear to me, and devoid of the Israeli-Palestinian context, there’s a dark reality: Our Western culture is riddled with ambient antisemitism. Screeds by such celebrities as Kanye West testify to the fact. As Israel is pulled into a conflict governed by jihadist game theory—where civilians are intentionally used as shields so that dead children can be broadcast as propaganda puppets on social media—antisemitism has and surely will continue to intensify around the world. In London, antisemitic hate crimes have already risen by 1,350%. Watch it grow, worldwide.

Yet, it’s the latter question—how so many hypereducated students have steadfastly embraced far-left ideology—that raises my greatest concern for our future. This should not have to be said, but if you find yourself mourning some civilian deaths while celebrating *any* others, there’s an objective problem with your worldview. And you. The notion that one can distill our world’s most complex, historically dynamic, and challenging conflict into simplistic binaries is so utterly absurd that it clearly exposes the shortcomings of “woke” ideology. Or any dogmatism, for that matter.

Outside of lacking vital historical context, I’ve been aghast to learn that this branch of the progressive left does not seem to understand *why* such horrors were committed upon Israeli citizens. Unfortunately, there is an explanation beyond “colonial resistance”—radical jihadism. Granted, not all forms of jihadism are based on terrorism, and all Muslims are, of course, not jihadists. But make no mistake: The ones who are responsible for these brutal acts of murder, rape, and mutilation are radical jihadists. Groups like Hamas are, quite

literally, death cults that are not sequentially distinct from Nazism—the death cult that systematically annihilated my grandparents’ entire extended family. The cult that the Allied West had no confusion about needing to destroy. Hamas’ stated intention is the eradication, first, of Israeli Jews—then all Jews everywhere. That is a genocidal agenda. The IDF, with all its flaws, which are numerous and sometimes deadly, avoids civilian Palestinian deaths whenever and however possible. That is the opposite of a genocidal agenda.

I truly wish it were as simple as reducing this conflict to an oppressor/

oppressed dynamic. I am waiting, with horror, as Israel prepares for a ground invasion that will claim thousands of thoroughly innocent lives. I do not want *any* Gazan children to be collateral damage. My Jewish values, along with what I’ve learned advocating for Palestinian statehood, continue to affirm my belief in the importance of upholding the rights of Palestinian civilians.

Any ideology that “justifies” or minimizes the tragedy of civilian casualties is broken and perverse. That is not to say that all such casualties are avoidable. Reform Jews of my generation are unified

in a desire for a two-state solution that provides Palestinians with safety, dignity, and rights. Over the past two weeks, I have heard no American Jew wish violence upon Gazans; I’ve witnessed many American so-called progressives who wish violence upon Jews. In response to raped teenagers and headless babies, a common leftist online refrain has been: “What did you think decolonization looked like?”

That’s not progressivism. That’s bloodthirst. ■

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COMMUNITY

# Weddings in Wartime

After the Hamas attack of October 7, many Israeli couples changed their plans—moving up dates, or downsizing or postponing ceremonies. Other couples never made it to the chuppah.

BY HILLEL KUTTLER

**L**ast Sunday, Hadas Gabay and Eliran Lanzer stooped beneath a lemon tree’s branches and, to the bride’s mother Tamar’s vocal rendition of Arik Einstein’s “Love at First Sight,” walked hand-in-hand down a white carpet and into matrimony.

Only 14 guests were there—in Gabay’s parents’ backyard in Shoham, a town of about 20,000 in central Israel—to witness the small wedding ceremony at 3:30 in the afternoon, and to enjoy refreshments on the patio and a light meal at the dining room table. It was hardly the gala for 500 people the couple had planned for Sunday night at a catering hall.

The radical downsizing complied with the home front’s crowd restrictions following Hamas’ October 7 massacre of Israelis near the southern coast, as the Israel Defense Forces prepare to

enter the Gaza Strip intent on wiping out the terrorist organization governing the enclave.

So the couple winged it. A friend styled the bride’s hair. Gabay’s sister snapped photographs. They rented a chuppah.

Given the circumstances, “we aren’t inclined to do a big event,” Gabay had explained by phone two days earlier. “We all know people serving in the IDF and who were killed. It’s hard to celebrate, to do a big event now.”

Even a downsized wedding, she said, “shows that life continues.”

“It’s not the wedding you imagined,” the officiating rabbi, David Stav, told the couple under the chuppah. “Please God, there will be time to celebrate in a larger manner.”

The Lanzas plan to do so with their full complement of invitees after calm returns.

They are hardly alone among couples

whose dream weddings have met security realities and somber moods in a country where grooms- and brides-to-be are pressed into reserve duty, with many dispatched to the tense northern and southern borders.

Couples countrywide postponed their weddings indefinitely, advanced them or, like the Lanzas, kept the date but shifted venues. Some without plans to marry decided, in the concentrated vision wrought by the national crisis, to hitch their wagons in sorrow and in joy. Still others arranged quickie weddings on military bases in the few hours allotted to them and without even parents as witnesses.

The Bible exempts from battle newlyweds, along with men planting vineyards, and those building their homes—but that applies only to wars of choice. In defensive wars, such as the current one, everyone is a soldier, Stav—Shoham’s chief rabbi and the chairman of Tzohar, an organization of Orthodox rabbis seeking to bridge the observant-secular divide—explained by phone.

In a vacuum, weddings are not delayed “because it’s a mitzvah to marry and establish a family”; on the other hand, celebrations should be avoided during grim periods for the Jewish people, he said.

Stav, who’s performed four weddings during the crisis, and whose four sons and three sons-in-law were called into reserve duty, said Israel’s rabbinate

takes a hands-off approach and defers to each couple's judgment: "There's a tension within Halacha, so the rabbis feel that it's best to leave it to the couple. Generally, we don't interfere on this matter."

Alec Burkin and Danielle Haliva postponed their wedding.

The 230 guests planning to attend their October 12 ceremony included 120 from abroad, 50 of whom had already reached Israel before the Hamas attack.

On the morning of October 7, the couple awoke in their Jaffa apartment to news of the invasion. They saw the video clips of murder and shooting and kidnapping. A few hours later, they and many of the travelers gathered at the Tel Aviv apartment Burkin's father rented. Burkin and Haliva didn't want anyone to be endangered.

They slept on the decision, and, the next morning, postponed the wedding and told everyone to fly home.

"I started to mourn the loss of the wedding," said Burkin, a Boston native. "I thought it would be irresponsible [to hold the wedding]. I didn't want our wedding plans to influence people's safety. I felt passionately about that. I don't think anyone was surprised. They were sad and shifted quickly to getting out of the country. That was a relief to me."

By the end of the week, all the foreigners had departed, most for Turkey and Greece before finding their way home.

While disappointed, Burkin said a ceremony merely formalizes his and Haliva's five-year relationship. They'll reschedule when the time is right.

"The most difficult thing to stomach," Burkin said, was being unable to expose "the beauty of Israel" to the foreigners, some of whom had never visited the country.

"We don't feel like we need the validation of any governmental or religious body telling us we're married. We feel very much married and will do everything we can to make the initial goals of the wedding come true in the future," he said. "There's still a desire to do something, to celebrate in some capacity. It's hard not to imagine celebrating our love publicly."

**"He's a combat soldier, so I think we all know what that means."**

Ori Minzer and Elinor Yossfin held their wedding—on the fly, without even having been engaged.

The couple was vacationing on a boat near Ko Phi Phi, an island in Thailand, when they learned of Hamas' massacre.

Both received texts summoning them to reserve duty. They took a ferry and a plane to Bangkok, boarded a 10-hour flight to Israel, landed at 7:30 p.m. on October 8, and were driven the six miles to Shoham.

By 9:30 p.m., on the town hall's lawn, with their parents and Yossfin's sister their only loved ones present, they were married.

They'd discussed marriage during their seven-month courtship, but Minzer hadn't yet proposed. He's the romantic one, Yossfin said. She's the practical one, and wanted her legal status cemented should anything befall Minzer, who's now based near Gaza.

"He's a combat soldier, so I think we all know what that means," Yossfin said by telephone at noon on Monday, October 23.

Rabbi Stav married off this couple, too; 20 youths to whom he'd spread the word brought a chuppah and the two official witnesses required for a Jewish wedding. The couple borrowed relatives' rings for the ceremony. Afterward, the seven family members in attendance

sat on the grass, munching on two store-bought cakes: one red, one white.

The ceremony was recorded and posted online, and the comedian Hanoach Daum shared it on Facebook. When the couple returned to their Tel Aviv apartment, friends lit up their phones with congratulations because Daum's share went viral.

The new husband and wife still wore what they had on in Thailand and at their improvised wedding: Minzer was in jeans, a white polo shirt, and sneakers; Yossfin was in shorts, a striped shirt, and sandals. In famously informal Israel, they'd lowered the wedding-fashion bar still further.

"We came from the flight tattered and tired," Yossfin said, chuckling.

"The [wedding] was not at all how we imagined it. It's not at all how I wanted it to be. We were also very nervous, because we didn't know what will be. Ori said romantic things. I didn't know what to say. I said, 'Thank you,'" she said. "We decided it's for the best. People said it's nice to have good news in these difficult times."

With that, she cut our interview short to visit Minzer for two hours in the town of Kiryat Malachi. Minzer had just called to say his unit would briefly be there. Before calling, he sent her a bouquet of flowers.

Yossfin left to see him, bringing along two wedding rings she'd just purchased.

"We're connected now," she said.

Amitai Zvi Granot and his fiancée, Roni Levinson, planned to marry next February. But he called her at 2 a.m. on October 15, from near where he served along Israel's border with Lebanon. During their two-hour conversation, he pushed for their wedding to take place during his next leave, advancing the date because of Israel's security crisis. She agreed.

But the wedding will never be. Granot, a lieutenant in the tank corps and a platoon leader, was killed by Hezbollah terrorists just hours after their phone conversation, in a battle at Moshav Shtula. Rabbi Tamir Granot said his son was "24 years and 4 months old."

The couple had met four months earlier. On Sunday, October 1, they

attended an engagement party hosted by Levinson's family near Haifa. Granot then returned to his tank unit. Hezbollah soon launched missiles from Lebanon into northern Israel in a bid to open a second front in the war.

Only after his son's death did Rabbi Granot learn that he fought terrorists much of his last days alive, killing several squads seeking to enter Israel.

"He was very modest and he also didn't want to worry us," Rabbi Granot said.

As a boy, his son loved nature. He and

his wife, Avivit, joked that "he did his degree in canals and [water] springs," Rabbi Granot said. While not studious early on, he greatly respected his teachers, even to his detriment.

Following high school, Granot came into his own at a yeshiva in Beit Shean. Friends told of admiring his empathy and gentle nature, and also his leadership skills—"a quiet charisma," Rabbi Granot said. When his son returned home for weekend leaves from the military, he'd kiss both parents, then, forsaking proffered food, would stride to the

piano and fold his 6-foot-3 frame onto the bench to play and sing.

"You'd see the strength of a fighter and a Jewish gentleness. It was in harmony," his father said. "This was a boy who'd filled out, who was about to be married, poised to produce [for us] a grandson or granddaughter, to establish a household. This pains me terribly. It's hard to describe. I have so much appreciation and respect for my beloved son." ■

*This article was originally published on October 25, 2023.*

## COMMUNITY

# Birthright Worked

Spending 10 days 'on the bus' almost 20 years ago made me feel connected to Israel for the first time. Following the Hamas attack this month, I realized how much that sense of connection has endured.

BY ALINA DIZIK

**A**s I doom-scrolled social media after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, in between photos of kidnapped and dead Israelis, I saw my Facebook friends showing their solidarity with Israel by posting grainy photos of their youthful faces and physiques in front of touristy backgrounds from their Birthright trips. I suddenly realized what Birthright's founders knew all along: When a tragedy of this scale happens, the in-person connection to Israel is critical to preserving the country's existence. Without this trip, I—like many other nonreligious Jews—would have been left on the sidelines—right now, feeling unconnected from the events happening far away. For many of us, including myself, our Birthright trip was the only time we've been to Israel. Though I vowed to come back soon, I still haven't; had it not been for Birthright, I may never have visited at all.

But I did. And so did hundreds of thousands of others. And now that the conflict has widened, and people are posting their opinions on social media, or attending rallies, or signing petitions, I can say that for me—and, I imagine, for many young Jewish adults—Birthright worked. I feel connected. What's happening in Israel and Gaza affects me in a way that wouldn't be possible if I hadn't spent time "on the bus."

In late 2004, when I was 21 years old, I was preparing for a 10-day trip to see a country I'd never seen. The itinerary sounded exciting: the Dead Sea, Masada, the Wailing Wall, Bedouin tents. It was winter back home in Chicago, and I couldn't wait to be in warmer weather. More pressingly for a college student (with journalism as my chosen profession), it was free.

Like many of my fellow Birthright participants, I wondered if there was a catch. Could visiting Israel on this heritage trip result in a sort of one-sided

view of the conflict that I wasn't prepared for? (Prior to the trip, I only knew the basics about the conflict.) Would I be tempted to stay and live there? (I didn't have a job lined up, so could be convinced to stay.) Become more religious? (I had immigrated to the U.S. from what's now Ukraine as a child and grew up mostly secular.) Was there something I'd need to do to pay back the cost? I was suspicious. (And so was my family.) But it didn't matter. The opportunity wasn't one I was willing to pass up.

When I arrived in Israel with my group, it did not feel like just another trip abroad. I felt instantly welcomed and swept up in all the places we were to explore. I was also struck by just how secular many Israelis were and how cosmopolitan Tel Aviv felt. Looking around there were so many people who seemed exactly like me. Other times, I was more focused on helping my fellow travelers enjoy the bottles of vodka someone had thoughtfully purchased at duty free. A program, hosted toward the end of the trip, that gathered thousands of Taglit-Birthright participants under one roof was especially powerful. I extended my stay for a few days to spend time with family friends who live there.

While I was in Israel, I can't claim to have encountered that sense of belonging I had heard others discuss. But I did get glimpses of it. During my time, I actively considered new ways of being Jewish, strengthening my resolve to light Shabbat candles each week. And the Jewish guilt of taking a free trip

would sometimes take over: I vowed to at least donate the money they spent on my trip back to Jewish charities once I started working.

At the time, the trip also felt like overkill. As a Jew I felt that I would support other Jews whether I stepped foot on Israel's soil or not. There was no need to spend thousands on an extravagant trip to ensure this. I wondered why the philanthropists in charge wouldn't just spend these funds in other ways or donate the money to more lifesaving organizations.

Between the late nights and jet lag, the trip felt like a blur. And it did feel one-sided at times. But I returned to the U.S. not only feeling part of the larger community of Jews from around the world, but also closer to Israel.

Over the years, I've seen Birthright references come up in many touching ways. A close friend met her husband on a trip—and later returned for their wedding. Another dear friend met her best friend on the trip. There are countless sweet stories like this, but the one constant was that everyone came away with a realization about themselves and their place in the world. For years, it also felt like a way to bond with other Jews my age. It was the ideal icebreaker. Everyone had a Birthright story, it seemed.

In retrospect, I realize that I couldn't quite grasp how important the trip was. Until now.

Thanks to Birthright, the social posts I saw my friends post this month expressed solidarity in a way that felt authentic. And those 10 brief days

**“I couldn't quite grasp how important the trip was. Until now.”**

continue to serve as a foundation for conversations among us. These were not just stories of traveling in your 20s.

It's not any different for me. The names and landmarks I see on the news seem almost recognizable and allow me to care more deeply about the conflict. And the experience provided a backdrop for empathizing with the terrible deaths at the hands of Hamas, too.

The Birthright trip also made it harder for me and others in the U.S. to just turn our backs. It's the reciprocity principle, which means that we as humans always want to give something back when something is received.

The latest stats tell what a force

Birthright has become. Since 1999, more than 800,000 people have taken the trip, aimed at 18- to 26-year-olds. It's now the “largest educational tourism organization in the world,” according to the website. For comparison, their alumni network is twice the size of Harvard's, and it binds entire generations of Jews together.

In retrospect, there are major things I would have changed about my trip.

I wish that the organizers would have facilitated conversations with Arab Israelis, or that I took my own time to explore the conflict and history in a more nuanced way. That I learned more about the thousands of Palestinians crossing checkpoints each day to work inside Israel or the ones who were displaced in 1948. Aside from being surprised to encounter so many uniformed and armed soldiers, I left knowing very little about the ongoing conflict—I don't blame the organizers; that was never their goal—but the trip forced me to dig deeper in the years that followed.

There are memories involved at every step, and that's exactly the point. The backers, which include the Israeli government and a host of Jewish organizations, bet on the fact that there would be an especially grueling time when this kind of support would be critical. Unfortunately, that time is now. The trip was by no means perfect, but 20 years later, I'm thankful for those 10 days. Follow us: ■

*This article was originally published on October 20, 2023.*

## STONE COLD TRUTH

## Tablet

elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies  
's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning  
political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left  
right. It's the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's  
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