

# STOP BEING SHOCKED

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# THE TAB

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## NEWS & POLITICS

# Stop Being Shocked— Once and for All

The ideas, institutions, and people that caused the collapse

BY THE EDITORS

**N**one of the horrors you are seeing this week — not the massacre of Jews, not the betrayal by popular activist movements, not the moral insanity of our universities and cultural spaces — happened by accident.

For the past decade, an elite consensus began to emerge. It was marketed as a worldview of optimism, of progress and justice brought about by the dawning of correct morality. It favored using the power of digital monopolies and elite institutions to re-educate Americans in new and better ways of thinking, writing, speaking and being.

Many of us at Tablet believed strongly, and still believe, in the possibility of creating a better world. But something bothered us from the very beginning about these ideas, and the people pushing them. Every time we pressed on a newly mass-embraced policy proposal or narrative—intersectionality, decolonization studies,

the Iran Nuclear Deal, Russiagate, Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, Critical Race Theory, COVID lockdowns—something weird happened: the idea itself fell apart at the seams within seconds of contact with reality, and yet its defenders got more sure of themselves, more performatively boastful, more passionate and gleeful about smearing anyone who dared to question them. Indeed, over time, we were struck by how little the ideas themselves seemed to matter; what so many people seemed most attached to was power.

The more we listened to freshly-minted universal experts, the more we were struck by the increasing lunacy of their pronouncements on every topic under the sun, always backed by “studies” and “science”—where COVID-19 came from, how many genders there are, which skin tones and personal experiences qualify a person for protection status and which do not, whether it was ok for a Syrian

dictator to bomb and gas 500,000 of his people, whether the US should ally itself with a Holocaust-denying medieval theocracy, whether the President of the United States was secretly a Russian agent, whether large American cities should let drug addicts and violent schizophrenics get high on the streets and steal stuff.

As journalists, the increasingly strident calls for uniformity of opinion and perception struck us, from the very beginning, as dangerous and wrong. We believe in empirical investigation and analysis and in subjective personal observation and experience, not in party-line obedience to an instant consensus being formed and managed God knows how or where. As Jews, we had concerns

too. For as long as we've been in this country, Jews have relied on and sung the praises of stalwart American institutions like the federal government, universities, media organizations, corporations, labor unions, and more. We watched in horror as each of these institutions not only fell prey to the new mania, but also seemed increasingly unable to do the jobs they had historically been tasked with doing.

We were also alarmed that...no one else was alarmed, especially among communal leaders. Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the American Civil Liberties Union, once the protectors of the vulnerable, became handmaidens of power. Think tanks and politicians

and journalists gave cover for policies that seemed obviously destined to set the world on fire, both at home and abroad.

Tablet didn't wade into the culture wars for its own sake. We did it because we feared we saw an emerging world in which the broad-minded American civic ideals and institutions that had kept us safe for so long were falling apart, and that as a result Jews would once again be seen as enemies to be eliminated. We were right.

As a result, our archive now looks like the answer to the question faced by so many people this week—namely: What the hell is going on? ■

*This article was originally published on October 13, 2023.*

ARTS & LETTERS

# The Collapse

Is this the end of American Jewry's golden age?

BY ADAM GARFINKLE

**H**ow cosmically lucky the American Jewish community is, blessedly sited at the intersection point of two forms of chosenness, two forms of exceptionalism. A perfect storm of *mazel*, one might say: American Enlightenment universalism and Jewish particularism matched up like peas in a pod. Our serendipitous good fortune is invoked routinely for any number of purposes. Here is how the Tikvah Fund advertised a March 26 lecture by Ruth Wisse on Irving Kristol: “[H]e felt twice blessed, as a Jew and an American, and cheerfully shored up the best of both traditions ...”

This self-serving celebration of conjunction has always been an exaggeration, fully credible only insofar as the celebrants didn't push too far into the

details. But it no longer much matters because the bottom is falling out of the very basis of the exaggeration. Whatever American Jewish “golden age” there may have been is over, folks. And it's over for a small number of entwined reasons that are as easy to grasp analytically as they are hard to take on board emotionally.

One of those reasons is that American Jews are rapidly and irreversibly becoming politically homeless. They are losing their “natural” political hearth in the Democratic Party. Partisan political support for Israel has shifted sharply to an increasingly white-populist GOP—a party the vast majority of American Jews will never feel at home in. That shift was probably accelerated by some shrewd if shortsighted political maneuvering a few years back, when the

Israeli prime minister, at the invitation of Republican leaders, blindsided the president of the United States from the rostrum of the Congress. But it was happening anyway, pushed by the Democrats and pulled by the Republicans.

That is one meaning of the recent Ilhan Omar affair. The Democratic old guard couldn't even squeeze a pathetic symbolic anti-Semitism resolution out of the House. Imagine what it won't be able to do when something that really matters happens. Whoever missed this episode can count on many similarly manufactured such episodes in the future to make the point crystal clear.

In due course, the dilemma of political homelessness will split the American Jewish community into three quarrelling pieces: loud but relatively small numbers of leftist, anti-Zionist secular Jews who will fawn like Hannah Arendt's parvenus over Democrats who openly loathe Israel and indulge in antisemitic tropes; even smaller numbers of right-oriented Jews, many religious but many not, who will essentially beg or try to bribe the Republicans for their favor; and a far larger clot of confused Jews who will either become fuzzily apolitical or, perhaps, seek out third-party alternatives that may be waiting in the wings.

This split, or shattering, of the American Jewish community's once-solid partisan alignments and influence will accelerate a deeper and more important demographic trend, which has been decades in the making: The disappearance of Jews. With intermarriage rates now reportedly at around 72% for non-Orthodox American Jews, the writing is on the wall, and it doesn't say "*Mene, mene tikel upharsin.*" It says, "You're screwed, and you did it to yourselves."

How so? It's simple, as these things go. Most American Jews have long had trouble believing in the standard-issue rabbinic God, which, after all, comes to us as a semifinished product of medieval times. Few such products thrive amid the tailwinds of the Enlightenment *zeitgeist*, so this stuttering propensity to disbelief is no surprise if we're in a mood for a little honesty.

Halachic Jews, by the way, are not spared this problem. It just expresses itself in a different (and sometimes the same) way. The dissonance between needing to believe and being privately unable to do so creates all sorts of private theological creativity, but also many private tensions. Religious communities are only sustainable because, of the three great balms that organized religion provides its members—community, intellectual energy, and spiritual life—the first two most often overawe the third.

How have most American Jews adapted to their belief-deficit? Jacob Neusner summed it up a long time ago: The State of Israel became the new god and the Holocaust the new liturgy.

This shift to a politicized form of Judaism, Rabbi Neusner warned, would not be transmissible across generations. But it seemed to most lay leaders and ordinary folk at the time that it was no less transmissible than older versions of Judaism, which obligated time-consuming and probably marginalizing levels of Jewish education that most families were not up for amid all the pleasures and distractions of the consumer age. Ask a clingingly educated American Jew to prize traditional virtues like self-discipline and patience, for himself and his children, over the hyperindividualist

**“In politics we always live on volcanic soil.”**

culture of narcissistic self-gratification? Fat chance.

Neusner did not predict what the “spiritual” consequences of a post-Labor Party Israel might be here in America, because he didn't need to: An idol is an idol. And he might have referred to just one generation instead of generations, because that has been closer to the norm of failed transmission he predicted. But even he didn't know that it would happen *so* fast.

Rabbi Neusner might also have mentioned that, in the American context, there was nothing exclusive to Jews in the cultural disintegration he foresaw. E. Digby Baltzell, the man who invented the acronym WASP, and who of course was one, told me on a spring day back in 1970 that “the worst thing that has happened to American society in the 20th century is the transmission of the energies of religion into politics, *to the detriment of both.*” He was right. I still don't know if professor Baltzell understood that right there on the Penn campus we were standing in the epicenter of a then still-young Fourth Great Awakening, seeing as how its cultural appurtenances were not explicitly “churched” as earlier ones were. But probably he did.

In any event, Baltzell unerringly described American Jewish trajectories, nonhalachic and halachic alike. Just as the nonhalachic majority of American Jews alchemized rabbinic Judaism into a form of sacred Zionist politics, so did most modern Orthodox

Jews—especially after the June 1967 war. If the nonhalachic majority of American Jews became diaspora auxiliaries of the Labor Party (Ma'arach) during the 1960s and '70s, the minority of modern Orthodox American Jews became auxiliaries of the National Religious Party (Mafdal). Thus did Ben-Gurion and Avraham Yitzhak Kook join arms, in a manner of speaking, not just in the old Promised Land, but also in the new Promised Land.

This is where things get uncomfortable. It did not seem especially risky at the time to export traditional rabbinic Jewish attitudes into books, their accompanying *midot* with them, or to escrow those attitudes and *midot* in black-hat domains, while all the pulse-raising action turned toward the political. It seemed, rather, irresistible to do anything else.

But the risks were only hiding. It is now *de rigueur* to scold those of our adversaries who, we typically claim, mask their anti-Semitism in anti-Zionism. But what do we expect them to do, when we are the ones who engineered and marketed the conflation of the two for purposes of our own?

Whatever American Jewish ‘golden age’ there may have been is over, folks.

As the shine comes off the Zionist apple, religious Jews in America retain the option to seek solace in the abiding rituals of their faith communities—or to leave America for Israel. But most nonhalachic Jews lack such options, because ritual for them has long since become ceremony—performative displays for the sake of others rather than inward acts for the sake of self. And few will emigrate to a place that is no longer shiny. That is why, of the three shards of American Jewry sketched above, it is the third group of confused, politically homeless Jews who are most likely to contribute to the downward-tilted demographic “event” at hand.

Many American Jewish leaders ignore or misunderstand what is happening because it is hard to admit that they and those they purport to represent are in big trouble. The most common example of confirmation bias at work is the reflex to blame anti-Semitism for

rampant assimilation. Abraham Foxman once wrote a book with this argument as its main thesis. But no: This trouble is mainly self-inflicted, and the history of Jewish diasporas tells us how unsurprising this is. Far more Jews stopped being Jews for internal reasons of choice than for external reasons of coercion, from Visigothic Spain to 19th-century Germany and many times and places in between. Indeed, anti-Semitism, short of mass murder at least, has generally had the effect of stiffening individual Jewish backbones and helping Jewish communities to better cohere.

Not unsurprisingly, the experience of recent centuries and Zionist historiography has warped appreciation of this historical reality. But American Jews are rarely taught this history, or any history, and even if they were most would simply assume that it doesn't apply to them, because America is different.

Well, yes it is, and no it isn't. Both assertions bear some truth, but oddly enough, they both point to the same conclusion: The future of American Jewry is grim.

How is America different as far as Jews are concerned? Three ways matter most.

First, the United States evinces an unusual form of nationalism best described as civic nationalism. There are hearth cultural roots and associated bloodlines here, of course; but the United States is an immigrant society tethered more tightly to an abstract concept of the public realm than is the case in typical ethnic nationalisms. The American concept of the public realm is derived from the Enlightenment, as embodied and conveyed in social form through Anglo-American Protestantism. That concept of citizenship has been generally broad, expandable, and ultimately quite inclusive: That has been useful for Jews.

Second, an historically remarkable feature of Anglo-American Protestantism has been its Judeophilic orientation. That has been useful too, notwithstanding its occasional passive-aggressive character toward real extant Jews.

And third, America has been different for Jews because while the most prominent "other" in Europe for purposes of

**“Blacks have taken in the neck the brunt of what the ‘worse angels’ of the American personality have dished out.”**

social and political scapegoating and identity maintenance were Jews, the most prominent "other" for those purposes here have been African Americans. Blacks have taken in the neck the brunt of what the "worse angels" of the American personality have dished out. In doing so, they have served as a deflector shield of sorts for Jews. Jews of course did not create this circumstance, but they have benefited from it all the same.

American Jews also benefited enormously from the anti-discrimination laws of the desegregation epoch. Those laws, written to protect blacks, destroyed most of the quotas and glass ceilings that had hemmed in Jewish professional mobility.

As a more abstract form of the genre, civic nationalism is more fragile than its standard ethnic-based counterparts. It *needs* to be liberal to endure as a democracy at all, and liberalism is an historically acquired taste. That makes the American way in such matters more vulnerable to shocks.

So what happens, then, when the Enlightenment predicates on which American civic nationalism depends erode? What happens when Anglo-American Protestantism shrinks dramatically as a shaping force in American culture? And what happens when nativist impulses

latch onto not only racial but ethnic/immigrant populations to generate xenophobic backlashes that are themselves pre- or anti-Enlightenment in character? We are bound to find out, because all three of those things are happening.

So how is America not different as far as Jews are concerned? Again, three ways matter most.

First, in politics we always live on volcanic soil. Normal times may be disrupted, a little or a lot, for a range of reasons always more clearly understood in retrospect than when they are occurring. When all hell breaks loose, minorities become vulnerable to the harvest of fear, which is hatred and, sometimes, violence.

This is true everywhere, because it is baked into human social nature. No society is eternally immune from such dynamics. We've had a good run here for a good long while, and we exaggerate the perturbations of, say, the late 1960s or the "malaise" of the late 1970s. These were almost imperceptible irritants compared to Civil War and Reconstruction, to Bleeding Kansas before that, and before that to the Know-Nothings, New England's threat to secede from the Union during the War of 1812, the Alien and Sedition Acts, and more. If what is truly normal in American history over its longer haul returns, we're in for some genuine nastiness.

Second, Jews have a way of punching beyond their weight. When you tell a typical gentile that the Jewish population of the United States today is around or a bit less than 2%, they are liable to think you are joking. As Benjamin Disraeli, evidently in a sardonic mood, once quipped, Jews "can do everything but fail." His remark is of a kind with one attributed to Goethe: "Energy is the basis of everything. Every Jew, no matter how insignificant, is engaged in some decisive and immediate pursuit of a goal. It is the most perpetual people of the earth." The point of both remarks is that Jews stick out, in professional life, in academia, in business, in the entertainment industry, even in sports—mostly owning teams, not playing on them. Minorities who stick out raise their profiles beyond any capacity to control them

in unstuck times. We've done it again in America.

Third, we insist on maintaining our particularism even as we chase down majority tastes and protections. There is nearly always enough wiggle room to get away with this balancing act. That was true in Babylonian times, Achaemenid times, Hellenistic times, Roman times, and many more recent times. In America the wiggle room has usually been wide enough to drive a semitruck through it. But there are always limits, and fraught times always force choices as limits impinge. They may be about to impinge, which illustrates the obvious fact that no matter how influential Jews may become in a society, punching beyond their demographic weight, 2% of any population will never be able to shape the larger variance of social and political developments on a national scale. In America as elsewhere historically, Jews are ultimately a dependent variable.

Put all this together and what does it mean? No one knows for sure, but here is my intuition.

Acute social divisions in the country are making political violence more likely, and that violence is bound eventually to target Jewish institutions and individual Jews. At some point extremists will run out of rhetorical shock bars to climb on social media, and see their only next step as moving from the virtual world to the real one. That has already begun, of course, in Pittsburgh. Its growth will change everything, even if Jews are only one of many groups targeted by xenophobic loners and gangs.

There is disturbing irony looming here. It could be that in a decade or two, or perhaps sooner, risen anti-Semitism will be taken by American Jews as a fact in being, and so pointed backwards in time will seem to validate claims that anti-Semitism caused the massive assimilation of which they are the clinging remnant. These validations will be wrong. They will also be for all practical purposes irrefutable in the moment. This is already irritating, and it hasn't even happened yet.

Meanwhile, too, Jewish political clout is likely to diminish and, more importantly, become more diffuse. That will

**“Left-of-center Jews will become ever more alienated from Israel, because they seem unable to understand (or credit) the existence of liberal forms of nationalism.”**

cause its net influence to decline and be so perceived. It will diminish most rapidly on the left side of the political spectrum, which has until now been the most convivial “home” for the vast majority of American Jews. But as already mooted in passing, it cannot be easily reconstituted on the right side of the political spectrum, because most American Jews do not share the political values enthroned there. And even those who do may have to compete inside the party with the white ethnonationalist forces that are rising on the right, and which will surely match, if not exceed, the current intensity of “tribalism” on the left.

As Jews find themselves homeless in both political parties, left-of-center Jews will become ever more alienated from Israel, because they seem unable to understand (or credit) the existence of liberal forms of nationalism. This assumes that liberal nationalism remains alive and well in Israel, which of course is not assured. Either way, to the extent they remain involved in politics, the Israel portfolio will decline in relative significance. This is already a well-advanced phenomenon, as the nontrivial number of American Jews rallying behind Ilhan Omar clearly shows. Support for Israel will become a liability even for mainstream politicians within

the Democratic Party. Arguably, it already is.

No one will fight for a community that is divided among itself and in the throes of demographic collapse. Thanks to the continuing steep decline of Jewish education and experience among nonhalachic American Jews, the assimilation/intermarriage data suggests that within two to three generations (18 x 3=54 years) the number of Americans professing to be Jews will be on the order of a third to a quarter of what it is today.

That means that Orthodox Jews—modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox or Haredi—will make up increasingly larger percentages of the whole American Jewish community; even so, significant numbers of that community may emigrate to Israel, depending on conditions there, as their alienation from “progressive,” post-Enlightenment American culture reaches a point of no return. Those who remain will become more insular and perceived as cultish within the American cultural mainstream, beyond what is already the case.

Israel, meanwhile, will be fine. Many forms of Orthodoxy will thrive there, and many forms of secular Jewish civilization in the making will thrive there as well. Israel is already the largest and most vibrant Jewish society on earth. But the American Jewish community’s “golden age” will be gone, and most of the American Jewish community will disappear with it. There will be periodic hopeful revivals, and they will all fail.

It could be that one day, if anti-Semitism fails to produce enough pluck and staying power in American Jewry, a final remnant of secularists will build museums to “the way we were.” (Forgive me, Barbra.) We are good at museums, so they will doubtless be very nice museums. But the urge to build a museum carries with it its own conclusion about the subject of the exhibits. When the ribbons are cut during the inauguration ceremonies, the story of American Jewry, in all its color and moments of glory, will really and truly be over. ■

*This article was originally published on April 11, 2019.*

# Get Out

American universities have become whirlpools of downward mobility that target the people and the ideas that they once cherished and protected. It's time for Jews to stop paying for them.

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

**W**hen I immigrated to America, 20 years ago this fall, I had just over \$2,000 in my pocket that I'd saved working as a night watchman at a factory back home in Israel. I also had an inflatable mattress on the floor of a friend's one-bedroom in White Plains, New York, and a promise that I could stay for two weeks, maybe three, until I found a place of my own. But most importantly, I had a story about my future.

As soon as I woke up that first morning, I took the train to 116th and Broadway, got off, strolled through the gates of Columbia University, and stood there gazing at the bronze Alma Mater sculpture guarding the steps to Low Library. Her face was serene, her lap adorned by a thick book, and her arms open wide, to embrace, or so I imagined, folks like me who were reasonably smart and wildly motivated and ready to work as hard as was needed to make something of themselves. In a year, maybe two, I thought, I'd find my way into the ivied cloister, and when I emerged on the other end I'd no longer be just another impoverished newcomer: A Columbia degree would accredit me, would validate me and suggest to those around me, from members of my family to potential employers, that I was a man in full, worthy of my slice of the American pie.

It wasn't a story I had made up on my own. It was, in many ways, the foundational story of American Jewish life in the 20th century. Surveying the student body in major American universities between 1911 and 1913, the newly founded intercollegiate Menorah Association discovered 400 Jews at Cornell, 325

at the University of Pennsylvania, and 160 at Harvard; by 1967, *The New York Times* reported that 40% of the student body in both Penn and Columbia were Jewish, with Yale, Harvard, and Cornell lagging behind with a mere 25%. For a minority that today is still just three or four generations removed from the deprivations of the old continent and that never rose much further above the 2% mark of the population at large, education—especially at renowned universities—was a magical wardrobe that led into a Narnia of possibilities. All you had to do was open the door.

Sadly, that door is now closing. It's not just that the number of Jewish students in the Ivies are plummeting—Harvard's class of 2020, for example, is only 6% Jewish. It's that the universities themselves, responding to a host of larger cultural, social, and political trends, have divested themselves of the values and practices that have made them mighty engines of American intellectual and economic growth as well as a springboard for striving Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Jewish students from well-heeled American families may still vie for places at Yale or Princeton; proud Jewish parents may still giddily direct the family minivan to Cambridge while touring prospective colleges; and wealthy Jewish philanthropists may still give generously and gratefully to the institutions that helped make their success possible. These people are well intentioned, but the evidence has become overwhelming that they are now throwing good money after bad: The century-long relationship between American Jews and the nation's elite universities has rotted away. Now is the time for all of the good

people involved—students, parents, donors—to get out, and fast.

American universities are openly breaking their bonds with the Jewish community by embracing active discrimination against Jewish students and rejecting their intellectual, emotional, and moral attachments to the values of equal human dignity, universal rights, critical inquiry, and rational thought. Last month, the student-run College Council at Williams, one of the nation's top-rated liberal arts colleges, denied the request of a new student-run group to be recognized as a Registered Student Organization. The group, Williams Initiative for Israel, is dedicated to promoting Israeli culture and the Jewish state's right to exist. The council provided no reason for its refusal, and, breaking with protocol, allowed anonymous voting, scrubbed names of participants from the protocol, and disabled the livestream of the council's meeting, deeply compromising the transparency of the voting process. The decision violates Williams' own Code of Conduct, which states that the school shall be "committed to being a community in which all ranges of opinion and belief can be expressed and debated. ... The College seeks to assure the right of all to express themselves in words and actions, so long as they can do so without infringing upon the rights of others or violating standards of good conduct or public law."

Jewish students should take note. What the undergraduate Jacobins at Williams hate isn't Bibi Netanyahu, or "the occupation," or even Zionism. What they hate are the values that used to make American universities great, and that made Jews such a great fit for American universities. In an intellectual environment increasingly governed by fear—adopt our rigid worldview or be labeled racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, Islamophobic, ableist, or worse—and living almost entirely in the shadows, away from public scrutiny, the true intellectual seeker is not an asset but a liability. There's nothing Jewish students, at Williams or anywhere else, can do to change that. They should realize, as many already do, that they're not disliked and targeted because of



the views they hold, which they might conceivably change; they're disliked and targeted because of who they are. Paying for teenagers to be subjected to this kind of rejection and abuse is an act of communal self-destructiveness that we would be smart to eschew.

If this sounds like needless histrionics, consider the case of NYU. After seven years of hard work and good fortune, I graduated with a Ph.D. from Columbia in 2007, and was thrilled to find employment teaching at the downtown campus of New York's other great university. It didn't take long for me to realize that no amount of effort or excellence—not even a teaching award I had won a few years into my career—would absolve me of the original sin of failing to conform to my colleagues' rigid worldview, a zealous outlook that anointed all the world's minorities as inherently and irredeemably oppressed and condemned the Jews to play the comically ahistorical role of privileged white oppressors.

Believing that a great university was nothing if not an arena for the free and unfettered exchange of ideas, I tried to engage in conversation and debate, only to find that those presumably shared values were no longer on the menu. When I asked to attend a colleague's seminar on boycotting Israel, my request was declined. Instead, I was told bluntly that only those who supported singling out the world's sole Jewish state for calumny might attend. I understood that my days by Washington Square Park were numbered. I left NYU and the teaching profession a short while later. When I think back on that time, which is often, I am struck not so much by personal anger as by an unbearable sadness for a formerly great institution that, having once nurtured everyone from Judy Blume to Alan Greenspan, is now inhospitable both to Jews and to the larger intellectual tradition that helped Jews flourish in America.

Just how inhospitable that place has become was evident this month, when the university's branch of Students for Justice in Palestine won the Presidential Service Award, one of the highest honors NYU bestows on members of its academic community. The decision shocked and angered many in NYU's

Jewish community, who noted that the group's actions frequently veered into the violent and the antisemitic: In 2014, for example, the group targeted Jewish students by handing out fake eviction notices in what it argued was a protest of Israel's policies, and in 2018 two SJP members were arrested after forcefully crashing a campus celebration of Israel's Independence Day, seizing Israeli flags, and setting them on fire. Most recently, several of the group's members accosted Chelsea Clinton at an NYU memorial to the victims of the deadly shooting at a Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque, accusing her of stoking murderous Islamophobia due to her questioning earlier this year of Rep. Ilhan Omar's antisemitic statements about Jewish money purchasing political influence. How, many on campus and off wondered, could such a bigoted bunch win a major award at any university, let alone one whose most celebrated schools are named for the well-known Jewish families who paid for them to be built?

The question proved surprisingly difficult to answer. The Presidential Service Awards, according to the university's website, "are given to students or student organizations that have had an extraordinary and positive impact on the university community." Just who decides what accounts for "positive impact," however, was unclear: A university spokesperson replied that the awardees are chosen by a volunteer committee of faculty, administrators, and student representatives, but would divulge neither the nomination process nor criteria, nor the identity of any of the committee's members.

Attempts to find an answer to these seemingly simple questions proved futile. Emails to several officials at the office of the SVP of Student Affairs, which administers the awards, went unreturned. Enlisting the help of several of my former colleagues who still teach at the university proved equally futile: Even those currently employed by NYU could not get their colleagues to say precisely who gets to decide for the university what passes for award-worthiness.

Concerned by these developments, a handful of NYU's Jewish trustees and

donors began exchanging emails and phone calls, wondering what to do. Their obvious address, according to several people who participated in these exchanges or are familiar with them, was the university's president, Andrew Hamilton. The president, according to one donor who spoke to him but prefers to remain unnamed, "said all the right things," reiterating his commitment to keeping Jewish students feeling safe and welcomed at NYU.

"Had it been up to me," Hamilton wrote last month in a letter to *The Wall Street Journal*, "SJP would not have received the award—not because of its politics or NYU's opposition to its pro-boycott, divestment and sanctions positions, but because SJP's behavior has been divisive."

But just what can one university president do to affect the nature and tone of life on his or her campus? The answer, it seemed, was not much: After Hamilton skipped the award ceremony, NYU's Department of Social and Cultural Analysis decided to escalate the fight against Israel and pledge noncooperation with the university's study-abroad program in Tel Aviv. No sanctions were proposed against NYU's satellite campuses in Shanghai or Abu Dhabi, nor was an explanation given as to how or why the department chose to take the unprecedented step of promulgating its own policy, directly contradicting those of the university at large. The department's website currently states that it "encourages its faculty and student members to act in the spirit of noncooperation outlined in the Resolution," but several department officials failed to return emails asking what measures, if any, would be taken against students who choose to exercise their right to study in Tel Aviv. It remains unclear what, if anything, President Hamilton or anyone else at NYU can or will do to discipline the department.

The problems that the scuffles at NYU or Williams present far transcend the specific bureaucratic entanglements and leadership issues at a handful of particular academic institutions. Similar stories occur in universities throughout the nation, raising the question of what, if anything, future Jewish involvement

with American academia should look like. On the most basic level, Jewish donors must ask themselves why they should continue to financially aid and abet institutions that offer very little by way of accountability or transparency, while incubating hate. But the question runs deeper than that, touching on the very role the university currently plays in American life, and its utility for Jews or any other minority group wishing to make it in America.

For nearly a century, universities proved central to American Jewish life because they offered two assets without which few, particularly among the children or grandchildren of immigrants, could succeed. The first was knowledge. The second was accreditation, the lifeblood of any meritocracy; a graduate of a good university could depend on her diploma translating into a good job in an industry of her choice. Neither of these assets are available today: In the past 20 years, if not earlier, American universities have dramatically increased the cost of tuition while dramatically reducing the quality of product they deliver. In 2001, for example, the cost of a university education was 23% of median annual earnings; by 2011, the number soared to 38%, causing student debt to double. Around the same time, a federal survey tested the literacy of college-educated citizens—defined as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”—and found that only a quarter were deemed proficient.

The startling failure of American universities to teach basic skills in advertised areas of competence is due to a host of factors, including the emergence of identity-politics-related fields of study devoted to the promulgation of sectarian dogma rather than to independent thinking and research. It is also closely related to the shifting identity of those doing most of the teaching: In 1969, for example, about 78% of faculty members in American universities and colleges held tenured or tenure-track positions; today, that number is roughly 20%, with all other classes, including at elite institutions, being taught by poorly-paid adjuncts. At NYU, for example,

a majority of classes—55%—are taught by adjunct professors who earn as little as \$800 a month per class. Many of these adjuncts—I speak from experience here—are excellent and dedicated teachers, but their compensation makes it impossible for them to invest any real time in their students, or to risk even the glancing disapproval of activist students or faculty, which might deprive them of their meager stipends.

This rapid decline in the quality of the education that American universities offer might not have impacted the value of their diploma had the tech industry not disrupted all aspects of life, giving birth to an economy that values a highly specialized skillset that can be just as easily learned on YouTube or in a six-week coding class. Stories of famous billionaires dropping out of college abound (see under: Zuckerberg, Mark), as do tales of renegades paying young Americans to forgo college and go into business instead (see under: Thiel, Peter). But you needn’t go to extremes to evaluate the profound crisis of accreditation that American universities are experiencing these days: If you’d like a job and haven’t a degree, you can find employment not only at Costco and Chipotle but also at Google, Apple, IBM, and the Bank of America. With colleges, for the most part, teaching very little by way of remunerative skills, it’s safe to assume that many other employers will follow suit, making the requisite college degree a thing of the past, the equivalent of a gold-embossed certificate from the Che Guevara Finishing School.

The rapid decay of American universities as purveyors of useful or profound knowledge impacts all Americans, not just Jews. But Jews suffer from some particular drawbacks that make universities not just an inane waste of time and money but downright hostile environments. The evolution of even the finest American universities into hotbeds of dogmatic identity politics and very little else make them increasingly inhospitable to Jews and to Jewishness, an identity that privileges the questioning and challenging of majority dogmas. It took well over a thousand years for Western civilization to allow open challenges to the metaphysics that painted Jews and

the values of questioning and difference that they embodied as inherently offensive to God; it took even longer for societies to see that those values might be a powerful engine of human intellectual and social development, and to insist that all citizens should at least theoretically be equal under the law. While it is hard to say how long it will take to reverse the headlong retreat of American universities into medieval sectarian idiocy, it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. In the meantime, though Jews may be unable to reverse this calamity on their own, there is no reason why they should be footing the bill for it, either.

So here’s my advice: Put that felt Harvard pennant back in your closet, and file those fundraising letters from your alma mater in the garbage can, where they belong. Why? Because she just doesn’t love you anymore. If you’re a young Jew who is thinking about tagging your parents with the bill for a famous college or university, don’t bother—you’ll do just as well, if not better, in today’s America without an expensive diploma, and you’ll get a much better education by getting a job, renting an apartment, and seeing how Americans actually live these days, outside of safe spaces and ideological echo chambers, while reading great books and educating yourself away from the dogmatic madness of the modern-day academy. If you must apply to a college or a university, in order to learn a specific technical skill that is somehow unavailable on the internet, refuse to subject yourself to any environment that displays, even remotely, the sort of ugly symptoms on display at Williams or NYU. An institution that does not demand basic civility and true respect for intellectual diversity isn’t worth your time as a scholar.

And finally, Jewish communal machers: Please stop offering up lavish new buildings and campus centers and multi-million-dollar bequests in honor of your fathers and mothers, who would probably be rolling over in their graves if they could see and hear what goes on inside the buildings that bear their names. Any Jewish donor invested in any institution in which Jewish students regularly live in fear of retribution from classmates



or teachers for asserting their own basic human dignity and attachment to the values of free inquiry and critical reasoning should demand her or his money back. Let the Qataris or the Saudis be the suckers who pay for the hatred and gibberish in which so many American university students are being forced to major.

American universities, their faculties,

and their student activists are of course at liberty to exercise their academic freedoms in whatever ways they choose; they can turn their institutions into radical chic summer camps and publish all the books they want about the IDF harvesting Palestinian organs. In a world premised on free choice and open inquiry, many individuals—and institutions—may embrace ideas that are

utterly idiotic and vile. Freedom also means that Jews should not be expected to pay for turning their children into second-class citizens, or for the destruction of the values that have made our lives as Americans possible. ■

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NEWS & POLITICS

# The Prophet

Tragedy transformed Devorah Halberstam into New York City's most outspoken expert on antisemitic crime. Are we listening?

BY JACOB SIEGEL

One Thursday night in late November, New York City's incoming police commissioner, Dermot Shea, days away from his official swearing-in, arrived in central Brooklyn for a meeting with representatives of the city's embattled Jewish community. More than 200 people turned out for the event, including a delegation of local cops, several members of the department's top brass, Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez, and representing the public, over a hundred Jews, the primary target of New York's dramatic increase in hate crimes, who came from across the city's different sects and denominations.

The event did not take place at one of Manhattan's grand old synagogues, or in the midtown offices of a prominent Jewish organization, or even at the iconic headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in Brooklyn. Instead, the new police commissioner traveled to Crown Heights, in the heart of the city's Hasidic community, to hold his event at the Jewish Children's Museum—a tot-magnet filled with biblical exhibits, a pretend kosher supermarket, and a

spacious ball pit, that also happens to be the power center for its co-founder, a local woman named Devorah Halberstam.

In 1994, tragedy propelled Halberstam into a unique fate after her oldest child, 16-year-old Ari, was murdered in a brazen ambush on a van full of young Jewish boys crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. Ari's death devastated Devorah, who at the time was working as a secretary in Brooklyn while raising five children. Her grief turned into an obsession when the authorities asserted that her son's killer, a man named Rashid Baz, was simply beset by a random fit of road rage—and happened to have military-style weapons in his vehicle.

Halberstam devoted herself to finding the truth. She discovered that Baz, a Lebanese immigrant, was motivated by an Islamist political ideology and a strong desire to kill Jews—both of which were amplified in his Brooklyn mosque. By giving up luxuries like sleep, she found time between work and taking care of her children to teach herself about counterterrorism, a field still so new in the mid-'90s that there were hardly any resources. Within a short while, she had intuited that Ari's murder, far from being an arbitrary local

crime, was, in fact, an early expression of a growing global political movement looking to make itself felt through acts of violence both inside and outside New York City.

Few people took Halberstam seriously—until Sept. 11, 2001. After the years she'd spent learning the system while lobbying, schmoozing, guilting, and consulting public officials, the attack on the Twin Towers cemented her reputation. She became New York's eccentric, homegrown expert on the intersection of criminal justice and counterterrorism. Local and state police called on her to teach classes, the FBI invited her to speak, and her causes were endorsed by Mayor Rudy Giuliani, New York Sens. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Al D'Amato, and Gov. George Pataki. After the recent attacks in Jersey City, it was Devorah Halberstam who New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio called to stand by his side at a press conference, perhaps to shore up his sagging credibility. "I want to thank Devorah Halberstam," de Blasio told the gathered reporters. "I think Devorah's point is well taken, there are people out there who think they can act with impunity or don't even understand their actions. But once it is clear there are consequences, it changes the whole discussion."

"My son is dead 25 years," Halberstam told me on the night of Shea's November event at the children's museum, her voice accented in a Yiddish-inflected Brooklynese. "Whatever I've gotten done is from these two hands, and everybody who knows me knows it. I walked this path alone." The museum, which opened in 2004 based on Halberstam's vision and almost a decade of

her organizing and fundraising work, is dedicated to Ari.

Though she looked especially small standing next to Shea, there is something larger than life about Halberstam. She is strikingly glamorous, framed by the sweep of her long dark bangs and the asymmetrical hemline of a stylish, navy blue pleated dress. She carries herself with the drama and ceremony of a silent film star, vibrating at a Norma Desmond-level pitch of rage, allure, brilliance, and loneliness.

A half hour into the event the room was full but most of the seats remained empty. Clusters of Hasidic men and local cops stood around joking and making small talk near the line of tables at the back wall where aluminum trays held three varieties of chicken strips, two kinds of lo mein, and a medley of roasted vegetables, warming over Sterno cans.

Halberstam began calling members of the NYPD brass, each personally by name, and directing them where to sit. With that, the leaders of the largest and most powerful police force in the country took their seats, as did most of the other people in attendance. A small contingent of men, however, remained at the back of the room, their peyos swinging idly by their ears while they continued to talk and eat from small, white plastic plates.

Following a rabbi's benediction, Halberstam returned to the podium to introduce Shea.

"This place is not just a museum or a building. It is a living and breathing memorial," she said, shaking her right fist in the air. "To Ari Halberstam, my 16-year-old son who was murdered in one of the first terrorist attacks in this city only because he was a Jew."

As she pronounced her son's name, her voice hit a high pitched gasp, and a Lubavitch man standing next to me in work clothes rolled his eyes for my benefit. "She knows how to turn it on," he said in a low voice, after he saw me taking notes. "Crying like this all the time."

Halberstam cries often and without embarrassment, her voice wheezing and cracking before she quickly recovers. But, if she sometimes deploys her tears to knowing effect it is to counter

**"It's a societal problem. It's not a Jewish problem in particular. We're just victim number one."**

what she believes is an urgent threat. "This city is facing a real crisis," she said. "Now, while the NYPD has been responsive with coverage and apprehensions, the problem keeps escalating," she concluded, before welcoming Shea to the podium with a round of applause.

In 1994 Halberstam saw through the lens of her son's murder in New York City a vision of growing global terror. Today, she has another premonition, but this time of a more local danger with the attacks in New York, pointing to a breakdown in civic structures that will lead, if it continues unchecked, to a rising tide of disorder, crime and violence. "This latest wave has no evident organizing principle behind it aside from pure hostility against targets that are unmistakably Jewish," Armin Rosen wrote in these pages last year. "Not a single incident during the spike has been traced to ... any other organized entity." This apparent randomness, Halberstam suggests, does not mean there are no discernible causes behind the attacks but, on the contrary, that the root causes may be broader than many assume. "People obviously feel more and more that they have needs that aren't getting met. There's a lot of anger and resentment out there right now, more than many assume and about lots of things in this city—housing prices,

education—and it is turning into hate," she said. "It's a societal problem. It's not a Jewish problem in particular. We're just victim number one. And if there's no accountability, crime reigns. It is vitally important to address that."

It may very well be dangerous to underestimate Halberstam, but that does not make her easy to be around. It can be difficult to get a word in edgewise. She is long-winded and melodramatic and incapable of answering simple questions directly. Her presence alone is demanding. But once she begins to speak, she cannot be shut out. Halberstam's voice is growing louder now, as it has in past moments of crisis, issuing from some bottomless part of herself, echoing in the terrible lack left by her son's murder, and demanding to be heard.

Halberstam grew up in East Flatbush, one of eight children. Her mother was a preschool teacher at the local yeshiva, and her father was a former union linotypist who opened his own small business where he had all the kids working as proofreaders. "I know how to spell and I know grammar like nobody's business," she told me. "When I see people make spelling mistakes, I go berserk."

Her early years were spent in the tight embrace of lower middle class Brooklyn family life and the borough's extended Lubavitch community. "Put it this way, my father when he died didn't owe a person a penny," she told me, proudly. "He was part of the union. He had eight children, paid our tuition and married us all off, but a lot of it was table-to-mouth. He did what he had to do. *Duh-ya-gettit?*"

"Do you get it?" comes out that way: *Duh-ya-gettit?* It's how Halberstam punctuates her sentences. The words rush out in torrents, as if she constantly fears running out of time and missing her chance to relay the vital information she has gathered. *Duh-ya-gettit?* isn't a question, it's an exasperated plea for you to catch up already, a sound formed unconsciously from the burden of years making others confront the conclusions that she has not had the luxury to ignore.

Ari's father, from whom Devorah is now divorced, was a personal assistant to the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem

Schneerson. The oldest of Halberstam's five children, Ari grew up as a frequent and favored guest in the house of his community's spiritual leader. In 1994, when Schneerson was 92 years old and ailing, Ari joined a group of 15 young Hasidic boys on a trip to a Manhattan hospital to pray while the rebbe recovered from surgery and prepared to come home to Brooklyn. The details of what happened next have never been fully resolved in the public record.

According to Halberstam, that morning Ari had lingered to finish his prayers and was the last of the 15 boys to leave the hospital.

"He ran out to catch the van as it was rolling away and his tefillin was coming unraveled," said Devorah, her voice breaking into that high wail. "But it was Ari, so they made room for him." She is out of breath by the end of the sentence.

The rebbe's vehicle left first along with its police escort, while the van with the boys waited, following what Halberstam says were orders not to trail too closely behind. This is echoed by other sources from the Lubavitch community who say that on the night before the ill-fated trip to the hospital, police officers had instructed members of Chabad that if they were planning to visit the rebbe they should not follow the same route as his vehicle. The instructions, according to Halberstam, are evidence that the police knew of an increased threat and that Baz's real target that day was the Lubavitcher rebbe himself. If law enforcement had any evidence for this belief it was never publicized or presented in court, but it is a claim that Halberstam and others have steadfastly maintained over the years.

What no one disputes is that, at 10:24 that morning, at the on-ramp to the Brooklyn Bridge, Baz saw a van full of Hasidic boys, easily identifiable by their dress, and began shooting. He fired first with a MAC 11 Uzi-style fully automatic pistol, shooting through the window of his blue Chevy Caprice and shattering the glass before continuing to fire with a Glock 9 mm handgun. In his trunk, Baz carried a third weapon, a 12-gauge semiautomatic Street Sweeper shotgun.

As Halberstam relates, Ari was sitting on the wheel well at the back of the van

when he was shot in the head. Three other boys in the van were also injured, including a rabbinic student from Israel named Nachum Sasonkin who lapsed into a coma after the shooting but recovered and was eventually ordained as a rabbi with a bullet still lodged in his head. Four days after the attack, Ari Halberstam died in St. Vincent's hospital in Greenwich Village.

Devorah Halberstam has never really left this moment. She has never allowed herself to leave, believing that the circumstances of her son's death were distorted to serve political ends or mishandled by a justice system slow to adapt to Islamic terrorism and other new forms of ideologically driven violence.

"This was my child. This is not about a story I'm reading in the newspaper," she said. "This is before and after in my life. Who was I before? I couldn't even tell you anymore. This is who I became: my own investigator. Because I was told things that were just made up, by people who think victims are dumb.

*"Duh-ya-gettit?"*

Baz's attack was the culmination of a sequence of events that started years before. In 1990, Meir Kahane, founder of the far-right militant group the Jewish Defense League, was assassinated in Brooklyn by an Egyptian-born terrorist whose subsequent defense was partly funded by Osama bin Laden. That was followed in 1993 by the first twin tower bombing carried out by al-Qaida affiliates Ramzi Yousef and "Blind Sheikh" Omar Abdel-Rahman. Then in 1994, a follower of Kahane's JDL, a Brooklyn-born Jewish terrorist named Baruch Goldstein, walked into a mosque in Hebron and randomly opened fire, killing 29 worshippers before he was overcome and killed. It was four days after Goldstein's massacre that Rashid Baz entered the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, in a neighborhood deep in southern Brooklyn, where according to witnesses at his trial, he heard a speaker say that the Hebron shooting had taken "the mask off the Jews." He left the mosque and later that same morning shot up a van of visibly Jewish youngsters on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Yet, for years the FBI publicly referred to the killing as a road rage incident and

refused to further investigate the case. "Every time I sat in at meetings, I'd ask: why didn't the Feds take this case? It should have gone straight to them," Halberstam recalled. "Well, back then Yasser Arafat had just stood on the White House lawn with President Clinton and signed the peace treaty. Everybody was brand new. President Clinton was new, Mayor Giuliani was brand new. Nobody wanted to ruffle those feathers and nobody wanted to hear the word terrorism in those days, so some of it was because it was on nobody's radar screen, but there was another reason. It was also, 'Hey listen, let's shove it under the rug.'"

So Halberstam began to teach herself what she wanted to know. Along the way she found allies, people she turned to in order to learn or to leverage in her pursuit of justice. People like Fred Ghussin, the Palestinian-born senior investigator at the Manhattan DA's office. As Halberstam recalls, Ghussin was the only Arabic-speaking law enforcement official in New York state when Ari's murder was being investigated in the mid-'90s, and he began taking her on walks up and down Center Street near the courthouse where Baz was being tried and talking to her about what he knew. "All of a sudden things started to emerge. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to see it," she recounted. "He told me straight up, this came from the mosque."

(Ghussin died in 2007, after contracting lung cancer reportedly related to the toxic fumes he breathed while working at ground zero in the rubble of the Twin Towers. An official who worked on the Baz case confirmed to Tablet that Halberstam and Ghussin were in contact during the trial.)

"When I say to you, nobody knows the long road from beginning to end of the criminal justice system, the way I know it—I've been through every step ..." Halberstam told me recently at her office in the Jewish Children's Museum. She thumped her hand onto her desk: "Every," *thump*. "Step," *thump*. "Of," *thump*. "The," *thump*. "Way."

"I know the rules that all the different parties play, *duh-ya-gettit?*" she said. "How significant it is the way all these things evolve. It begins with the first arrest and it ultimately ends up with the

way we're gonna portray it in the media. Oh yeah, Rashid Baz was crazy. He was crazy like a fox."

In the summer of 2000, FBI Director Louis Freeh, who'd been in the job since 1993, for the entire duration of Halberstam's ordeal, invited her to his office at FBI headquarters in D.C. for what she remembers as a fateful meeting. Freeh, she told me, "was my nemesis. I told him I didn't sleep for six years over this." It was Freeh who Halberstam held ultimately responsible for the FBI refusing to take on Ari's case, thereby shunting it from a federal terrorist investigation into state criminal court and, in a final blow, trivializing her son's murder with the label road rage. "I want you to know you kept me up every night, I didn't sleep for all these years," she said to the FBI director. As Halberstam sat facing Freeh, she recalls seeing his children's artwork Scotch-taped to the walls behind him.

"I said tell me about your children, and after he finished telling me about his children I said, now let me tell you about Ari. I said my son was 6 feet tall. He had blue eyes that shined like the blue of the ocean; like marbles. I can't even begin to tell you how I wept," said Halberstam, sobbing again as she related the story to me. "He apologized to me because he's such a fine man. Really fine. It was about Ari being remembered for why he was murdered. It was about Jewish blood being spilt."

Freeh retired from the FBI in June 2001. That same month, Halberstam was picked to serve on the New York State Commission on Terrorism by then-Gov. George Pataki, with whom she also worked that year to secure the passage of New York's first state-level anti-terrorism laws. Halberstam then invited her old nemesis to a dinner planned for the not-yet-built Jewish Children's Museum, at which she would present Freeh with the Ari Halberstam award.

The dinner was scheduled for Sept. 12, 2001. It never happened.

In a matter of months, the country filled with experts on al-Qaida, radical Islam, peaceful Islam, Sunnism, Sufism, and anything else that might sell a book. Halberstam was no longer just a grieving mother to be placated. Her warnings

that radical Islamists were trying to operationalize their ideology and planning more terrorist attacks against American targets had been proved right.

Around this time Halberstam met Joseph Billy Jr., a veteran in the bureau, and the special agent then heading up the FBI's newly formed counterterrorism division in New York. "She was dressed very sharp. She seemed like a New York businesswoman who was on top of her game," he told me recently. "I was impressed with her awareness of the terrorism threat, not just al-Qaida and not only the whole Sunni extremist movement but beyond that even to the Shia side of you know, Hezbollah and all these other groups."

Halberstam's unique insight, Billy said, had to do with her understanding of the path between the early incipient forms of terrorist ideology and the violence that it inevitably unleashes.

"She understood that the breeding grounds to extremism can come in many different variations, it could be a small thing that's very subtle and you need to pay attention to those types of details because that could be the next Rashid Baz or the next Blind Sheikh," Billy said. "She didn't have the answers to it all—nobody did—but what she was able to encapsulate in her thinking was that the roots of extremism can be very varied and they can also go unnoticed. They can go undeterred if unchecked."

Halberstam also understood something else: how to maintain vital relationships with law enforcement and public officials within the complex web of personal and institutional ties that is New York City politics. All of her relationships are personal, and they have taken her decades to cultivate. If you're a cop, it's hard to deny a grieving mother who will look you in the eye and make demands. It's harder still when she has your phone number, and Halberstam seems to know the numbers for half the cops, prosecutors, and politicians in New York, along with their favorite drink and maybe a secret or two. She doesn't hesitate to call at any time to ask for an update or to take them to task while citing chapter and verse for whatever it is she thinks they've got to answer for.

During the Obama years, Halberstam settled into her role as a children's museum director moonlighting as a counterterrorism expert and fixture of the city's law-and-order corridors. She began conducting yearly training sessions with the NYPD and was regularly invited to speak before government agencies, nonprofit groups, academic bodies and various other organizations in and outside of the U.S.

"I'm so embedded in the hate-crime stuff because I know the criminal justice system from the beginning of it to the end of it, and I know the road that goes off and gets split many directions," she told me. "You need to know what each agency does, what role they play. You can't demand from a state prosecutor what they don't have. There are laws, there's a criminal law, penal code. They have to go by the penal code."

In this work, Halberstam has always sounded the same refrain: Anti-Semitism is a social contagion that, wherever tolerated or ignored, inevitably spreads and intensifies. It can only be dealt with root and branch. Where Jews are privately hated they will be publicly demonized. Where Jews are demonized, they will be harassed and attacked. Where they are attacked they will soon be killed. The process never stops by itself, and what starts with the Jews rarely ends with them.

Outbursts of anti-Semitism have historically ebbed and flowed in New York as they do everywhere. But starting around 2015 incidents targeting Jews became the leading cause of a general, marked increase in hate crimes throughout the city. By 2017, the NYPD was reporting an 81% spike in overall hate crimes compared to the same period from the previous year, driven by a 115% increase in antisemitic cases. Statistics on hate crimes vary based on reporting criteria. But in New York, a large body of evidence has accumulated over the past several years, not only in police reports but from security footage and cellphone videos showing incident after incident in which random religious Jews, visually identifiable by their dress, are harassed and physically attacked on the streets. According to a forthcoming report co-authored by a former NYPD

officer and detailed in a recent *New York Times* write-up, New York set a new record last year with 229 antisemitic hate crimes occurring through Dec. 30, up from 185 in 2018.

For years, even before the distraction of his ill-fated presidential campaign, Mayor Bill de Blasio did little to address or arrest the rise in antisemitic incidents in the city. The fact that he was so slow to act and understated in his response may be partly explained by his ability to take the Hasidic vote for granted. Whatever the feelings of battered Hasids in Williamsburg or Borough Park, who are the victims in the majority of violent hate crimes targeting Jews, there's little evidence to suggest that their communal leaders are prepared to break with the mayor and lose their line to City Hall and to the state Democratic Party establishment, which provides money for housing and schools.

When the mayor finally decided—or felt forced—to focus on anti-Semitism, he initially blamed white supremacists for hate crimes in New York City. “The forces of white supremacy have been unleashed and as you know those are profoundly antisemitic forces,” de Blasio said at a press conference in May of 2019 in response to a question about an incident captured on video in which a person of color could be seen spitting in a Jewish man's face. “I want to be very, very clear, the violent threat, the threat that is ideological is very much from the right,” the mayor repeated at a different press conference in June of last year. Gradually, de Blasio has been led by events toward a more expansive view of the problem. In a Dec. 13 radio address, 3 days after the shooting in Jersey City, he maintained that the rise in anti-Semitism, “is directly related to the permission that's being given to hate speech in the last three years and that obviously connects to the election of Donald Trump,” *but*, the mayor added, “it goes beyond that.” (The mayor's office did not respond to requests to comment for this article.)

In New York, where she lives and the spike in regular street attacks against Jews has taken place, Halberstam does not see the problem in terms of ideological enemies but looks instead to

“I've told it to the DA, and to the mayor—no plea deals on felonies. Zero tolerance. That means any felony charge on a hate crime, it has to go all the way to the judge.”

things closer to home. New proposals to change the laws around cash bail, parole for older inmates and other initiatives risk “going from one extreme to the other,” Halberstam said. “There has to be a happy medium,” she told me. “The Innocence Project is unbelievable, freeing people who are in jail or incarcerated when they shouldn't be. But let's not throw everything in the bag together. There has to be law and order in the streets. Suddenly it's like we're rewriting our whole constitution, which is ridiculous and it's one of the reasons why we're seeing so many hate crimes today. It's one of the reasons why.”

As it turns out, New York was one of the first states to enact hate crime laws. As far back as 1982, the state had adopted in the penal code aggravated harassment statutes for crimes motivated by bias, and in 2000 passed the New York State Hate Crime Act. The city's current problems stem, according to critics, not from a lack of regulatory structure but due to the fact that existing regulations are not being enforced by DAs. In Brooklyn, Halberstam believes that the problem can be located “at the point when the NYPD's Hate Crimes task force has an event and passes it on to [Brooklyn DA Eric] Gonzalez's hate crimes office.”

Gonzalez, who has his own division in the DA's office to prosecute hate

crimes headed by bureau chief Kelli Muse—has a penchant for plea deals on hate crime cases including those related to felony charges, according to Halberstam. “That's where the deals are being made and I'm not liking what I see at all,” Halberstam told me. “If we have hate crimes, they were put there to be meaningful. Meaningful means accountability. It doesn't mean let the guy out the door so they can go back home and tell his buddies. Nothing happens. Right?” A common response to these criticisms from officials inside the criminal justice system is that plea deals are a necessary tool to secure convictions in cases where the evidence might not be airtight. But Halberstam draws a line: “I've told it to the DA, and to the mayor—no plea deals on felonies. Zero tolerance. That means any felony charge on a hate crime, it has to go all the way to the judge.” (In response to a request for comment, a spokesperson for the DA's office told *Tablet*, “We will be taking a very strong stance on these cases.”)

Some of these issues peeked out at the November event at the children's museum with the new police commissioner. “You want to throw everyone in jail, we can keep crime down,” Shea told the room. “But how do we keep people out of the criminal justice system? That's going to be a refrain, Devorah, as we move forward in the next few years, and we're going to need everyone in this room's help.” There was nothing especially surprising in a new commissioner echoing the political rhetoric coming from city hall about criminal justice reform—but it did seem odd for Shea to have come all the way out to Crown Heights only to *not* offer any emphatic statements about using the full force of the police department to end the routine violence against Jews in the city.

While Halberstam is a relentless champion for her causes, she's not a political brawler. Her instinct isn't to attack enemies and secure her own position but to apply a steady pressure that wears down any obstacles in the way of her objectives. She eschews narrow partisan alignments and generally avoids sweeping statements about political parties and individual elected officials.

This leaves her occasionally more restrained in public pronouncements than her temperament might otherwise suggest, but free to criticize figures from across the political establishment and, when she feels they deserve it, to offer praise—including for Mayor de Blasio, whose recent overtures to the city’s Orthodox communities she believes are a step in the right direction. And she is guardedly hopeful about Shea’s tenure as top cop. “You have to remember,” she tells me, “he never worked with community people before. This is all new to him. So, he was an excellent cop; an outstanding chief of detectives. He knows how to take apart a case, but this is all brand new. Only time will tell where he’s going with this.”

And Halberstam’s attention is hardly limited to secular authorities; she also has pointed criticisms of prominent Jewish organizations, which she argues have not done enough to properly secure Jewish sites throughout the city—and which she feels are now wasting time and money building new bureaucracies devoted to “security” instead of quickly and without red tape actually securing them. “There’s only one thing the Jews need,” she yelled at me. “I’ll say it with the last breath in my body: physical security.”

The mixed feelings, it should be said, are mutual: “I’ve lost years of my life on the phone with that woman,” one influential figure in Jewish communal life told Tablet. Indeed, in private, Jewish figureheads and behind-the-scenes operators talk about Halberstam not as a visionary or a leader in her own right but as at worst an annoyance and at best a public symbol to be deployed according to their own much more sophisticated strategies. It’s a condescending attitude but it may be more palatable than the alternative view held by establishment types, which sees her as a rival, independent center of power.

Barely a month after the event with Shea, two people affiliated with the Black Hebrew Israelites drove into the Hasidic section of Jersey City armed with automatic weapons and open fire on the JC Kosher Supermarket. Before they are stopped, the pair murder four

people: 39-year-old police detective Joseph Seals; Moshe Hersh Deutsch, a 24-year-old yeshiva student; Leah Mindel Ferencz, a 33-year-old mother and the store’s co-owner; and Douglas Miguel Rodriguez, 49, a worker at the store. The day after the attack, Halberstam appeared at a press conference at New York’s City Hall.

Less than three weeks later, Halberstam was at the mayor’s side again. One day after de Blasio announced a new plan to crack down on anti-Semitism, they were together once more for a press conference following the machete attack at a menorah lighting ceremony in Monsey, a Hasidic community in upstate New York. The event, staged for television cameras, followed a six-day period in which nine separate antisemitic incidents were reported in New York City, including a 65-year-old man punched and kicked by an assailant yelling “fuck you Jew,” three women who were slapped in the face by an attacker who was arrested and released the following day, and a mother who was attacked in front of her child.

Halberstam’s influence is not just about how many important people she knows. It’s a product of the way she creates and maintains her relationships: intensely, relentlessly, and through the constant use of her three different cellphones. Her power is something she has woven around herself from the many threads of her personal connections, and therefore it cannot be simply transferred or redirected.

In one of our last conversations, Halberstam recounted something that happened to her a few nights earlier.

It was Dec. 26, the fifth night of Hanukkah. Halberstam was on her way from the city back into Brooklyn. She drove past the sign installed because of her, the sign she wishes every day she never had cause to see: “Ari Halberstam Memorial Ramp,” it says, in white letters on a blue background with white trim, hanging above the standard green traffic signs. It was 7 p.m., already dark out, and it was shift-change time for the police detail assigned to the bridge.

“There’s always a detail on the bridge and a new shift was just parking there,” Halberstam told me. “So I pull over and

ask them, ‘do you know what tonight is?’ And I start to tell them ‘My son ...’ The police officer at the wheel, who’s Asian, interrupts me. He goes, ‘your son?’ but before he can finish the other cop, who’s younger and who’s black, interrupts him and says ‘Ari.’”

Here, she pauses and I wait for the familiar *duh-ya-gettit?* but instead she says, “Hello! Are you still there?” Yes, I say, I’m just listening, and she continues.

“Ari,’ this cop said,” she tells me, tearing up. “He knew.” At this point, Halberstam started to explain to these two young police officers that this night happened to be the anniversary of the conviction of Rashid Baz, who murdered her son on the bridge they were all currently standing on. “I told them about how when the foreman announced the guilty verdict it went on for 40 minutes. And then the younger cop says, ‘That’s because of all the charges.’ I said, ‘How do you know that?’ And he says he remembers from when I taught his class! And then he tells me ‘You live in my precinct.’ Imagine that he even remembers that I live in the same neighborhood!” I said, “Oh my God. I want your name and shield number.”

“I told them you’re standing on hallowed ground. I called the chief and told him you must call these guys. They are rising stars. He was happy,” she recounted. “But then I said, no, listen to me, you have to do it *now*.” ■

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# Stop Being Shocked

American liberalism is in danger from a new ideology—  
one with dangerous implications for Jews

BY BARI WEISS

**C**an you believe ...?  
Perhaps no question has been repeated more times in reaction to more events this year than that one.

The most recent major outrage in the Jewish community, now several news cycles behind us, came on the Shabbat before Yom Kippur—the holiest day in the Jewish calendar—when many American Jews seemed dumbfounded by what was to me predictable news: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, progressive superstar, had pulled out of an event honoring Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister assassinated because of his efforts to make peace with the Palestinians. Rabin was, as Bill Clinton said at his funeral, “a martyr for his nation’s peace.”

Many Jews were shocked. If Rabin, the symbol of progressive Zionism, is out of bounds, are any Israelis acceptable? What about the 95% of Jews who support the Jewish state? Why would the congresswoman from the Bronx—representing the political party to which upward of 70% of American Jews have been consistently loyal—possibly *do* such a thing?

Perhaps, having previously admitted that she was “not the expert in geopolitics on this issue,” she didn’t know who Rabin was? That had to be it. Or maybe it was the fault of the Jewish community: Surely if she was introduced to the stable of *Haaretz* columnists she’d come around. After all, didn’t AOC say she had Sephardic heritage? Did she not realize it was Mandy Patinkin—Mandy Patinkin! International Rescue Committee ambassador!—who was hosting the event? She must not have understood. Surely there must be some

confusion. Some miscommunication. Some mix-up.

But it wasn’t AOC who was mixed up. The savvy politician had read the room and was sending a clear signal about who belongs in the new progressive coalition and who does not. The confusion—and there seems to be a good deal of it these days—is among American Jews who think that by submitting to ever-changing loyalty tests they can somehow maintain the old status quo and their place inside of it.

Did you see that the Ethical Culture Fieldston School hosted a speaker that equated Israelis with Nazis? Did you know that Brearley is now asking families to write a statement demonstrating their commitment to “anti-racism”? Did you see that Chelsea Handler tweeted a clip of Louis Farrakhan? Did you see that protesters tagged a synagogue in Kenosha with “Free Palestine” graffiti? Did you hear about the march in D.C. where they chanted “Israel, we know you, you murder children too”? Did you hear that the Biden campaign apologized to Linda Sarsour after initially disavowing her? Did you see that Twitter suspended Bret Weinstein’s civic organization but still allows the Iranian ayatollah to openly promote genocide of the Jewish people? Did you see that Mayor Bill de Blasio scapegoated “the Jewish community” for the spread of COVID in New York, while defending mass protests on the grounds that this is a “historic moment of change”?

Listen, it’s been a hell of a year. We all have a lot going on, much of it unnerving and some of it dire. Moreover, many of these stories only surface on places like Twitter; they don’t make it into the pages of *The New York Times* or your friends’ Facebook feeds, which is where

most Americans get their news these days. Reporters don’t cover these stories adequately, contextualizing them, telling readers which ones are true and which ones aren’t, which ones matter and which ones don’t.

So it makes sense that many smart, well-intentioned people are confused. Or rather: Looking for someone to explain why an emerging movement that purports to advance the ideals they have always supported—fairness, justice, righting historical wrongs—feels like it is doing the opposite.

There is also the X factor of Donald Trump, which is impossible to overstate. Understandable hostility toward him has prevented many Jews from seeing the problem on the other side. To even look away from the obscenity in the White House for a moment strikes many, as they have told me, as irresponsible or beside the point.

I share with the majority of American Jews’ disgust toward Trump and Trumpism, which has normalized bigotry and cruelty in ways that have crippled American society. That truth doesn’t detract from another: There is another danger, this one from the left. And unlike Trump, this one has attained cultural dominance, capturing America’s elites and our most powerful institutions. In the event of a Biden victory, it is hard to imagine it meeting resistance. So let me make my purpose perfectly clear: I am here to ring the alarm. I’m here to say: Do not be shocked anymore. Stop saying, *can you believe*. It’s time to accept reality, if we want to have any hope of fixing it.

To understand the enormity of the change we are now living through, take a moment to understand America as the overwhelming majority of its Jews believed it was—and perhaps as we always assumed it would be.

It was liberal.

Not liberal in the narrow, partisan sense, but liberal in the most capacious and distinctly American sense of that word: the belief that everyone is equal because everyone is created in the image of God. The belief in the sacredness of the individual over the group or the tribe. The belief that the rule of

law—and equality under that law—is the foundation of a free society. The belief that due process and the presumption of innocence are good and that mob violence is bad. The belief that pluralism is a source of our strength; that tolerance is a reason for pride; and that liberty of thought, faith, and speech are the bedrocks of democracy.

The liberal worldview was one that recognized that there were things—indeed, the most important things—in life that were located outside of the realm of politics: friendships, art, music, family, love. This was a world in which Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg could be close friends. Because, as Scalia once said, some things are more important than votes.

Crucially, this liberalism relied on the view that the Enlightenment tools of reason and the scientific method might have been designed by dead white guys, but they belonged to everyone, and they were the best tools for human progress that have ever been devised.

Racism was evil because it contradicted the foundations of this worldview, since it judged people not based on the content of their character, but on the color of their skin. And while America's founders were guilty of undeniable hypocrisy, their own moral failings did not invalidate their transformational project. The founding documents were not evil to the core but “magnificent,” as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, because they were “a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” In other words: The founders themselves planted the seeds of slavery's destruction. And our second founding fathers—abolitionists like Frederick Douglass—made it so. America would never be perfect, but we could always strive toward building a more perfect union.

I didn't even know that this worldview had a name because it was baked into everything I came into contact with—my parents' worldviews, the schools they sent me to, the synagogues we attended, the magazines and newspapers we read, and so on.

I was among many millions of Americans cosseted by these ideals. Since World War II, American intellectual and cultural life has been produced

and protected by a set of institutions—universities, newspapers, magazines, record companies, professional associations, labor unions, cultural venues, publishing houses, Hollywood studios, think tanks, historical museums, art museums—that aligned, broadly, with those principles. As such, they had incredible power—power that demanded our respect because they held up the liberal order.

No longer. American liberalism is under siege. There is a new ideology vying to replace it.

No one has yet decided on the name for the force that has come to unseat liberalism. Some say it's “Social Justice.” The author Rod Dreher has called it “therapeutic totalitarianism.” The writer Wesley Yang refers to it as “the successor ideology”—as in, the successor to liberalism.

At some point, it will have a formal name, one that properly describes its mixture of postmodernism, postcolonialism, identity politics, neo-Marxism, critical race theory, intersectionality, and the therapeutic mentality. Until then, it is up to each of us to see it plainly. We need to look past the hashtags and slogans and the jargon to assess it honestly—and then to explain it to others.

The new creed's premise goes something like this: We are in a war in which the forces of justice and progress are arrayed against the forces of backwardness and oppression. And in a war, the normal rules of the game—due process; political compromise; the presumption of innocence; free speech; even reason itself—must be suspended. Indeed, those rules themselves were corrupt to begin with—designed, as they were, by dead white males in order to uphold their own power.

“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” as the writer Audre Lorde put it. And the master's house must be dismantled—because the house is rotted at its foundation.

The beating heart of this new ideology is critical race theory. The legal scholar Angela Harris put it concisely in her foreword to *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*:

Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law. END

Critical race theory says there is no such thing as neutrality, not even in the law, which is why the very notion of colorblindness—the Kingian dream of judging people not based on the color of their skin but by the content of their character—must itself be deemed racist. Racism is no longer about individual discrimination. It is about systems that allow for *disparate outcomes* among racial groups. If everyone doesn't finish the race at the same time, then the course must have been flawed and should be dismantled.

Thus the efforts to do away with the SAT, or the admissions test for elite public schools like Stuyvesant and Lowell—for decades, the engines of American meritocracy that allowed children of poor and working-class families to advance on their merits, regardless of race. Or the argument made recently by *The New York Times'* classical music critic to do away with blind auditions for orchestras.

In fact, any feature of human existence that creates disparity of outcomes must be eradicated: The nuclear family, politeness, even rationality itself can be defined as inherently racist or evidence of white supremacy, as a Smithsonian institution suggested this summer. The KIPP charter schools recently eliminated the phrase “work hard” from its famous motto “Work Hard. Be Nice.” because the idea of working hard “supports the illusion of meritocracy.” Denise Young Smith, one of the first Black people to reach Apple's executive team, left her job in the wake of asserting that skin color wasn't the only legitimate marker of diversity—the victim of a “diversity culture” that, as the writer Zaid Jilani has noted, is spreading “across the entire corporate world and is enforced by a highly educated activist class.”

The most powerful exponent of this worldview is Ibram X. Kendi. His book

“How to Be an Antiracist” is on the top of every bestseller list; his photograph graces *GQ*; he is on *Time*’s most influential people of the year; and his outfit at Boston University was recently awarded \$10 million from Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey.

According to Kendi, we are all either racist or anti-racist. To be a Good Person and not a Bad Person, you must be an “anti-racist.” There is no neutrality, no such thing as “not racist.” Indeed, Kendi wants to ban those words from the dictionary.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s most famous speech would not meet Kendi’s definition of anti-racism, nor would the one Barack Obama made about there being too many fatherless Black families. Indeed, nearly everything that Americans have been taught about how to be anti-racist for the past several decades is, according to Kendi’s explicit definition, racist.

It’s a rhetorically brilliant strategy. Racism is the gravest sin in American life. Who would ever want to be anything other than an anti-racist? And so under the guise of a righteous effort to achieve overdue justice and equality of opportunity for Black Americans, Kendi and his ideological allies are presenting Americans with a zero-sum choice: conform to their worldview or be indistinguishable from the likes of Richard Spencer.

And just in case moral suasion is ineffective, Kendi has backup: Use the power of the federal government to make it so. “To fix the original sin of racism,” he wrote in *Politico*, “Americans should pass an anti-racist amendment to the U.S. Constitution that enshrines two guiding anti-racist principals [sic]: Racial inequity is evidence of racist policy and the different racial groups are equals.” To back up the amendment, he proposes a Department of Anti-Racism. This department would have the power to investigate not just local governments but private businesses and would punish those “who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.” Imagine how such a department would view a Jewish day school, which suggests that the Jews are God’s chosen people, let alone one that teaches Zionism.

Kendi—who, it should be noted, now holds Elie Wiesel’s old chair at Boston University—believes that “to be anti-racist is to see all cultures in their differences as on the same level, as equals.” He writes: “When we see cultural difference we are seeing cultural difference—nothing more, nothing less.” It’s hard to imagine that anyone could believe that cultures that condone honor killings of unchaste young women are “nothing more, nothing less” than culturally different from our own. But whether he believes it or not, it’s obvious that embracing such relativism is a highly effective tool for ascension and seizing power.

It should go without saying that, for Jews, an ideology that contends that there are no meaningful differences between cultures is not simply ridiculous—we have an obviously distinct history, tradition and religion that has been the source of both enormous tragedy as well as boundless gifts—but is also, as history has shown, lethal.

By simply existing as ourselves, Jews undermine the vision of a world without difference. And so the things about us that make us different must be demonized, so that they can be erased or destroyed: Zionism is refashioned as colonialism; government officials justify the murder of innocent Jews in Jersey City; Jewish businesses can be looted because Jews “are the face of capital.” Jews are flattened into “white people,” our living history obliterated, so that someone with a straight face can suggest that the Holocaust was merely “white on white crime.”

This is no longer a fringe view. As the philosopher Peter Boghossian has noted: “This ideology is the dominant moral orthodoxy in our universities, and has seeped out and spread to every facet of American life—publishing houses, tech, arts, theater, newspapers, media,” and, increasingly, corporations. It has not grabbed power by dictates from above, but by seizing the means of sense-making from below.

Over the past few decades and with increasing velocity over the last several years, a determined young cohort has captured nearly all of the institutions that produce American cultural and intellectual life. Rather than the

institutions shaping them, they have reshaped the institutions. You don’t need the majority inside an institution to espouse these views. You only need them to remain silent, cowed by a fearless and zealous minority who can smear them as racists if they dare disagree.

It is why California attempted to pass an ethnic studies curriculum whose only mention of Jews was to explain how they, along with Irish immigrants, were invited into whiteness.

It is why those who claim to care about diversity and inclusion don’t seem to care about the deep-seated racism against Asian Americans at schools like Harvard.

It is why a young Jewish woman named Rose Ritch was recently run out of the USC student government. Ms. Ritch stood accused of complicity in racism because, following the Soviet lie, to be a Zionist is to be nothing less than a racist. Her fellow students waged a campaign to hound her out of her position: “Impeach her Zionist ass,” they insisted.

It is why the Democratic Socialists of America, the emerging power center of the Democratic Party in New York, sent a questionnaire to New York City Council candidates that included a pledge not to travel to Israel.

It is why Tamika Mallory, an outspoken fan of Louis Farrakhan, gets the glamour treatment in a photoshoot for *Vogue*.

And this is why AOC, the standard bearer of America’s new left, didn’t think Yitzhak Rabin was worth the political capital, but goes out of her way, a few days later, to praise the Black Panthers. She is the harbinger of a political reality in which Jews will have little power.

It does not matter how progressive you are, how vegan or how gay, how much you want universal health

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care and pre-K and to end the drug war. To believe in the justness of the existence of the Jewish state—to believe in Jewish particularism at all—is to make yourself an enemy of this movement.

“It’s hard to overstate how suffocating this worldview is to specifically Jewish college students,” Blake Flayton, a progressive Jewish student at GW, wrote me recently. “We don’t fit into ‘oppressor’ or ‘oppressed’ categories. We are both privileged and marginalized, protected by those in power and yet targeted by the same racist lunatics as those who target people of color. The hatred we experience on campus has nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It’s because Jews defy anti-racist ideology simply by existing. So it’s not so much that Zionism is racism. It’s that Jewishness is.”

Let me pull that out for you. This isn’t about Zionism or landlords or capitalism or AIPAC. We live in a world in which everyone is being told to side either with the “racists” or the “anti-racists.” Jews who refuse to erase what makes us different will increasingly be defined as racists, often with the help of other Jews desperate to be accepted by the cool kids.

If you’re nearing the end of the essay wondering why this hasn’t been explained to you before, the answer is because, yet again, we find ourselves in another moment in Jewish history at a time of great need and urgency with communal leadership who, with rare exception, will not address the danger.

I understand why people have been blind to this. Life has been good—exceedingly good—for American Jews for half a century. Many older communal leaders seem to lack the moral imagination to see this threat. It’s also hard for anyone to hear the words: *They’re just not that into you.*

So when I try to discuss this with many Jews in leadership positions, what I face is either boomer-esque entitlement—a sense that the way the world worked for them must be the way it will always work—or outright resistance. *Oh please, wokeness isn’t important anywhere but in silly Twitter microclimates.*

“The past few years and the problems they have laid bare have rocked my faith like no others before. But the ideas this country is based on truly are exceptional, worthy of our relentless defense and more.”

When you explain that no, in fact, this ideology has taken over universities, publishing houses, the media, museums and is now making quick work of corporate America, you hit another roadblock: *Isn’t this just righting some historical injustices? What could go wrong?* You then have to explain what could go wrong—what is already going wrong—is that it is ruining the lives of regular, good people, and the more institutions and companies fall prey to it, the more lives it will ruin.

The dominoes are falling hard and fast. That’s how you get pulpit rabbis who argue that Jews should not claim ourselves to be indigenous to the land of Israel. Or an organization meant to fight anti-Semitism that aligns itself with Al Sharpton. Or a tinderbox in the city with the largest Jewish population in the country, whose communal outfits seem to care more about lending cover to politicians than ensuring the physical safety of Jews.

Last month, I participated in a Zoom event attended by several major Jewish philanthropists. After briefly talking about my experience at *The New York Times*, I noted that if they wanted to understand what happened to me, they

needed to appreciate the power of that new, still-nameless creed that has hijacked the paper and so many other institutions essential to American life. I’ve been thinking about what happened next ever since.

One of the funders on the call launched into me, explaining that Ibram X. Kendi’s work was vital, and portrayed me as retrograde and uncool for opposing the ideology du jour. Because this person is prominent and powerful enough to send signals that others in the Jewish world follow, the comments managed to both sideline me and stun almost everyone else into silence.

These people may be the most enraging: those with the financial security to oppose this ideology and demur, so desperate to be seen as hip; for their children to keep their spots at the right prep schools; so that they can be seated at the right tables at the right benefits; so that they are honored at Brown or Harvard; so that business does well enough that they can renovate their house in Aspen or East Hampton. Desperate to remain in good odor with the right people, they are willing to close their eyes to what is coming for the rest of us.

Young Jews who grasp the scope of this problem and want to fight it thus find themselves up against two fronts: their ideological enemies and their own communal leadership. But it is among this group—people with no social or political capital to hoard, some of them not even out of college—that I find our community’s seers. The dynamic reminds me of the one Theodor Herzl faced: The communal establishment of his time was deeply opposed to his Zionist project. It was the poorer, younger Jews—especially those from Russia—who first saw the necessity of Zionism’s lifesaving vision.

Funders and communal leaders who are falling over themselves to make alliances with fashionable activists and ideas enjoy a decadent indulgence that these young proud Jews cannot afford. They live far from the violence that affects Jews in places like Crown Heights and Borough Park. If things go south in one city, they can take refuge in a second home. It may be cost-free for the wealthy to flirt with an ideology that

suggests abolishing the police or the nuclear family or capitalism. But for most Jews and most Americans, losing those ideas comes with a heavy price.

America is imperfect. The past few years and the problems they have laid bare have rocked my faith like no others before. But the ideas this country is based on truly are exceptional, worthy of our relentless defense and more. They are under siege by Trumpism, but also by those who suggest that the solution

to our problems lies in obsessing on race; in suggesting that some Americans are more righteous or more cursed than others by dint of the circumstances of their birth; and in tearing down rather than renewing. That leaders and philanthropists charged to protect and nurture our community are entertaining, and at times embracing, such nihilistic and anti-American ideas is a scandal.

It is not by chance that Jews thrived in a world in which liberalism prevailed.

The idea that we should judge each person not by their station or their family lineage but by their deeds; that human beings have agency—these are revolutionary ideas that are, at root, Hebrew ones. We should never be shocked that any ideology that makes war on these true and eternal values will inevitably make war on us. ■

*This article was originally published on October 14, 2020.*

NEWS & POLITICS

# Everything Is Broken

And how to fix it

BY ALANA NEWHOUSE

**I**n the summer of 2014, I gave birth to a baby boy. He was born with a perfect Apgar score, after a very easy delivery. But my labor had not been smooth—in fact, throughout the day and a half of contractions, I believed there was something decidedly wrong. I also felt that way as I held him for the first time, and he writhed violently under my hands. In a video taken about 10 minutes after he was born, he can be seen lifting his head up off my chest. “Ooooh, look at how advanced he is!” someone can be heard trilling in the background, before her voice is overtaken by my own. “Don’t do that, love,” I say. Then, to the camera: “Does he seem like he’s in pain to you?”

It took my husband and me three years to understand that in fact I was right that day in the delivery room. Our son was hurt. And it will take him years to heal—longer than it should have, and that is on top of the injustice of the original wound—though I thank God every day that we figured it out.

The first breakthrough came when my husband David remembered a book about brain science he had read

a decade earlier, by a doctor named Norman Doidge. It changed our lives, by allowing us to properly understand our son’s injury (and to understand why we couldn’t manage to get a straight answer about it from any of the “experts” we had seen). It’s been a tough road, but from that moment on, we at least knew what to do—and why.

A year or so later, we met Doidge and his wife, Karen, for dinner, and it is here that the story may become pertinent for you.

After we ordered, I told Norman I had a question I’d been wanting to ask—and that I wanted his honest answer to it, even if it meant that I had done something wrong. I proceeded to relay to him the entire tale, from the very beginning to that very moment, of what felt to me like our Kafkaesque medical mystery journey.

How was it, I then asked, that it took my husband and me—both children of doctors, both people with reporting and researching backgrounds, among the lucky who have health insurance, and with access through family and friends to what is billed as the best medical care in the country—years to figure this out,

and that in the end we only did so basically by accident?

Norman looked at us sympathetically. “I don’t know how else to tell you this but bluntly,” he said. “There are still many good individuals involved in medicine, but the American medical *system* is profoundly broken. When you look at the rate of medical error—it’s now the third leading cause of death in the U.S.—the overmedication, creation of addiction, the quick-fix mentality, not funding the poor, quotas to admit from ERs, needless operations, the monetization of illness vs. health, the monetization of side effects, a peer review system run by journals paid for by Big Pharma, the destruction of the health of doctors and nurses themselves by administrators, who demand that they rush through 10-minute patient visits, when so often an hour or more is required, and which means that in order to be ‘successful,’ doctors must *overlook* complexity rather than search for it ... Alana, the unique thing here isn’t that you fell down so many rabbit holes. What’s unique is that you found your way out at all.”

I had barely started processing this when Norman moved to change the subject: “Now, can I ask you two something? How come so much of the journalism I read seems like garbage?”

Oh, God.

David and I looked at each other, simultaneously realizing that the after-school special we thought we were in was actually a horror movie. If the medical industry was comprehensively broken, as Norman said, and the media

was irrevocably broken, as we knew it was ... Was *everything* in America broken? Was education broken? Housing? Farming? Cities? Was religion broken? Everything is broken.

Let's say you believe the above to be hyperbolic. You never fell through the cracks of the medical system; as far as you understand it, there are plenty of ways for a resourceful person to buy a home in America these days; you easily met a mate and got married and had as many children as you wanted, at the age you wanted to have them; your child had a terrific time at college, where she experienced nothing at all oppressive or bizarre, got a first-class education that you could easily afford and which landed her a great job after graduation; you actually like the fact that you haven't encountered one book or movie or piece of art that's haunted you for months after; you enjoy druggily floating through one millennial pink space after another; it gives you pleasure to interact only with people who agree with you politically, and you feel filled with meaning and purpose after a day spent sending each other hysteria-inducing links; maybe you've heard that some kids are cosplaying Communism but that's only because everyone is radical when they're young, and Trump voters are just a bunch of racist troglodytes pining for the past, and it's not at all that neither group can see their way to a future that looks remotely hopeful ... If this is you, congratulations. There's no need to reach out and tell me any of this, because all you will be doing is revealing how insulated you are from the world inhabited by nearly everyone I know.

If, on the other hand, the idea of mass brokenness seems both excruciatingly correct and also paralyzing, come sit with me. Being on a ship nearly 4 million square miles in area along with 330 million other people and realizing the entire hull is pockmarked with holes is terrifying.

But being afraid to face this reality won't make it less true. And this is the reality.

For seven decades, the country's intellectual and cultural life was produced and protected by a set of

“Flatness is the mechanism by which a single ideologically driven cohort captured the entire interlocking infrastructure of American cultural and intellectual life.”

institutions—universities, newspapers, magazines, record companies, professional associations, cultural venues, publishing houses, Hollywood studios, think tanks, etc. Collectively, these institutions reflected a diversity of experiences and then stamped them all as “American”—conjuring coherence out of the chaos of a big and unwieldy country. This wasn't a set of factories pumping out identical widgets, but rather a broad and messy jazz band of disparate elements that together produced something legible, clear, and at times even beautiful when each did their part.

But, beginning in the 1970s, the economic ground underneath this landscape began to come apart. Michael Lind explains this better than anyone else:

The strategy of American business, encouraged by neoliberal Democrats and libertarian conservative Republicans alike, has been to lower labor costs in the United States, not by substituting labor-saving technology for workers, but by schemes of labor arbitrage: Offshoring jobs when possible to poorly paid workers in other countries and substituting unskilled immigrants willing to work for low wages in some sectors, like meatpacking and construction and farm labor. American business has also driven down

wages by smashing unions in the private sector, which now have fewer members—a little more than 6% of the private sector workforce—than they did under Herbert Hoover. END

This was the tinder. The tech revolution was the match—one-upping the '70s economy by demanding more efficiency and more speed and more boundarylessness, and demanding it everywhere. They introduced not only a host of inhuman wage-suppressing tactics, like replacing full-time employees with benefits with gig workers with lower wages and no benefits, but also a whole new aesthetic that has come to dominate every aspect of our lives—a set of principles that collectively might be thought of as *flatness*.

Flatness is the reason the three jobs with the most projected growth in your country all earn less than \$27,000 a year, and it is also the reason that all the secondary institutions that once gave structure and meaning to hundreds of millions of American lives—jobs and unions but also local newspapers, churches, Rotary Clubs, main streets—have been decimated. And flatness is the mechanism by which, over the past decade and with increasing velocity over the last three years, a single ideologically driven cohort captured the entire interlocking infrastructure of American cultural and intellectual life. It is how the Long March went from a punchline to reality, as one institution after another fell and then entire sectors, like journalism, succumbed to control by narrow bands of sneering elitists who arrogated to themselves the license to judge and control the lives of their perceived inferiors.

Flatness broke everything.

The reigning aesthetic of the 20th century was modernism, which articulated in one word the values of the industrial revolution. Modernism and the Machine Age brought with them their own features: Anti-classicalism; anti-Victorianism; the power of science; the absence of filigree; an emphasis on the future over the past, and the valorization of machine production and engineering as the highest forms of human creativity.



This new aesthetic soon began to transform all parts of cultural and material existence, from visual art and poetry to fashion and the built environment.

Starting in the second decade of the 1900s, certain Communists began seeing in modernism a potential advertisement for the values of a mass society of industrial workers laboring under the direction of a small group of engineers. In other words, this aesthetic—which whole swaths of the Western world were already in the process of quickly adopting—could also be the perfect delivery mechanism for their political ideology.

One hundred years later, we find ourselves in the middle of a similar cultural and political struggle.

Today's revolution has been defined by a set of very specific values: boundarylessness; speed; universal accessibility; an allergy to hierarchy, so much so that the weighting or preferring of some voices or products over others is seen as illegitimate; seeing one's own words and face reflected back as part of a larger current; a commitment to gratification at the push of a button; equality of access to commodified experiences as the right of every human being on Earth; the idea that all choices can and should be made instantaneously, and that the choices made by the majority in a given moment, on a given platform represent a larger democratic choice, which is therefore both true and good—until the next moment, on the next platform.

Here's a description of the aesthetics of Silicon Valley (emphasis added):

It's the realm of coffee shops, bars, startup offices, and co-live/work spaces that share the same hallmarks everywhere you go: a profusion of symbols of comfort and quality, at least to a certain connoisseurial mindset. Minimalist furniture. Craft beer and avocado toast. Reclaimed wood. Industrial lighting. Cortados. Fast internet. The homogeneity of these spaces means that traveling between them is *frictionless*, a value that Silicon Valley prizes and cultural influencers take advantage of. Changing places can be as painless as reloading a website. You might not even realize you're not where you started. END

“The machines trained us to accept, even chase, this high. Once we accepted it, we turned from willful individuals into parts of a mass that could move, or *be* moved, anywhere.”

“You might not even realize you're not where you started.” The machines trained us to accept, even chase, this high. Once we accepted it, we turned from willful individuals into parts of a mass that could move, or *be* moved, anywhere. Once people accepted the idea of an app, you could get them to pay for dozens of them—if not more. You could get people to send thousands of dollars to strangers in other countries to stay in homes they'd never seen in cities they'd never visited. You could train them to order in food—most of their food, even all of their food—from restaurants that they'd never been to, based on recommendations from people they'd never met. You could get them to understand their social world not as consisting of people whose families and faces one knew, which was literally the definition of social life for hundreds of thousands of years, but rather as composed of people who belonged to categories—“also followed by,” “friends in common,” “BI-POC”—that didn't even exist 15 years ago. You could create a culture in which it was normal to have sex with someone whose two-dimensional picture you saw on a phone, once.

You could, seemingly overnight, transform people's views about anything—even everything.

The Obama administration could

swiftly overturn the decision-making space in which Capitol Hill staff and newspaper reporters functioned so that Iran, a country that had killed thousands of Americans and consistently announces itself to be America's greatest enemy, is now to be seen as inherently as trustworthy and desirable an ally as France or Germany. *Flatness, frictionlessness.*

The biological difference between the sexes, which had been a foundational assumption of medicine as well as of the feminist movement, was almost instantaneously replaced not only by the idea that there are numerous genders but that reference in medicine, law or popular culture to the existence of a gender binary is actually bigoted and abusive. *Flatness.*

Facebook's longtime motto was, famously, “Move fast and break shit,” which is exactly what Silicon Valley enabled *others* to do.

The internet tycoons used the ideology of flatness to Hoover up the value from local businesses, national retailers, the whole newspaper industry, etc.—and no one seemed to care. This heist—by which a small group of people, using the wiring of flatness, could transfer to themselves enormous assets without any political, legal or social pushback—enabled progressive activists and their oligarchic funders to pull off a heist of their own, using the same wiring. They seized on the fact that the entire world was already adapting to a life of *practical flatness* in order to push their ideology of *political flatness*—what they call social justice, but which has historically meant the transfer of enormous amounts of power and wealth to a select few.

Because this cohort insists on sameness and purity, they have turned the once-independent parts of the American cultural complex into a mutually validating pipeline for conformists with approved viewpoints—who then credential, promote and marry each other. A young Ivy League student gets A's by parroting intersectional gospel, which in turn means that he is recommended by his professors for an entry-level job at a Washington think tank or publication that is also devoted to these ideas. His ability to widely promote those

viewpoints on social media is likely to attract the approval of his next possible boss or the reader of his graduate school application or future mates. His success in clearing those bars will in turn open future opportunities for love and employment. Doing the opposite has an inverse effect, which is nearly impossible to avoid given how tightly this system is now woven. A person who is determined to forgo such worldly enticements—because they are especially smart, or rich, or stubborn—will see only examples of even more talented and accomplished people who have seen their careers crushed and reputations destroyed for daring to stick a toe over the ever multiplying maze of red lines.

So, instead of reflecting the diversity of a large country, these institutions have now been repurposed as instruments to instill and enforce the narrow and rigid agenda of one cohort of people, forbidding exploration or deviation—a regime that has ironically left homeless many, if not most, of the country’s best thinkers and creators. Anyone actually concerned with solving deep-rooted social and economic problems, or God forbid with creating something unique or beautiful—a process that is inevitably messy and often involves exploring heresies and making mistakes—will hit a wall. If they are young and remotely ambitious they will simply snuff out that part of themselves early on, strangling the voice that they know will get them in trouble before they’ve ever had the chance to really hear it sing.

As with Communists and modernism, there was nothing inevitable about the match. Most consumers don’t know that by using internet-based (or -generated) platforms—by buying from Amazon, by staying in an Airbnb, by ordering on Grubhub, by friending people on Facebook—that they are subscribing to a life of flatness, one that can lead directly into certain politics. But they are. Seduced by convenience, we end up paying for the flattening of our own lives. It is not an accident that progressive ideas spread faster on the internet. The internet is a car that runs on flatness; progressive politics—unlike either conservatism or liberalism—are flatness.

I’m not looking to rewind the clock back to a time before we all had email and cellphones. What I want is to be inspired by the last generation that made a new life-world—the postwar American abstract expressionist painters, jazz musicians, and writers and poets who created an alternate American modernism that directly challenged the ascendant Communist modernism: a blend of forms and techniques with an emphasis not on the facelessness of mass production, but on individual creativity and excellence.

Like them, our aim should be to take the central, unavoidable and potentially beneficent parts of the Flatness Aesthetic (including speed, accessibility; portability) while discarding the poisonous parts (frictionlessness; surveilled conformism; the allergy to excellence). We should seek out friction and thorniness, hunt for complexity and delight in unpredictability. Our lives should be marked not by “comps” and metrics and filters and proofs of concept and virality but by tight circles and improvisation and adventure and lots and lots of creative waste.

And not just to save ourselves, but to save each other. The vast majority of Americans are not ideologues. They are people who wish to live in a free country and get along with their neighbors while engaging in profitable work, getting married, raising families, being entertained, and fulfilling their American right to adventure and self-invention. They are also the consumer base for movies, TV, books, and other cultural products. Every time Americans are given the option to ratify progressive dictates through their consumer choices, they vote in the opposite direction. When HBO removed *Gone with the Wind* from its on-demand library last year, it became the #1 bestselling movie on Amazon. Meanwhile, endless numbers of Hollywood right-think movies and supposed literary masterworks about oppression are dismal failures for studios and publishing houses that would rather sink into debt than face a social-justice firing squad on Twitter.

This disconnect between culturally mandated politics and the actual demonstrated preferences of most Americans

has created an enormous reserve of unmet needs—and a generational opportunity. Build new things! Create great art! Understand and accept that sensory information is the brain’s food, and that Silicon Valley is systematically starving us of it. Avoid going entirely tree-blind. Make a friend and *don’t* talk politics with them. Do things that generate love and attention from three people you actually know instead of hundreds you don’t. Abandon the blighted Ivy League, please, I beg of you. Start a publishing house that puts out books that anger, surprise and delight people and which make them want to *read*. Be brave enough to make film and TV that appeals to actual audiences and not 14 people on Twitter. Establish a newspaper, one people can see themselves in and hold in their hands. Go back to a house of worship—every week. Give up on our current institutions; they already gave up on us.

At the lowest point with my son—the moment when I was convinced something was deeply wrong, and that I would never be able to fix it—my husband found himself on a reporting trip, where he encountered the head of an illustrious yeshiva. I had been sending David desperate texts all afternoon, and at one point his own anguish became obvious. “What’s your son’s name?” the rabbi asked, and David told him it was Elijah. “Ah, the prophet of unlikely redemption,” he said, smiling. “With them, the good news is almost as hard as the bad.”

It took me a while, but I eventually figured out what he meant. Sometimes the task of rebuilding—of accepting what has been broken and making things anew—is so daunting that it can almost feel easier to believe it can’t be done.

But it can. ■

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# The Realignment

In the Middle East, Biden is finishing what Obama started. And his top advisers are all on board.

BY MICHAEL DORAN AND TONY BADRAN

**O**n Sunday, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan phoned his Israeli counterpart and turned back the hands of time. According to the American readout of the conversation, Sullivan called “to express the United States’ serious concerns” about two things: the pending eviction, by court order, of a number of Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Jerusalem, and the weekend’s violent clashes on the Temple Mount between Israeli police and Palestinian rioters. The Biden administration, in other words, publicly asserted an American national interest in preventing the Sheikh Jarrah evictions, regardless of the dictates of Israeli law—just as Hamas was sending rockets and incendiary devices into Israel with the same message. This conscious effort to put “daylight” between the United States and Israel marked a clear return to the approach of President Barack Obama.

Sullivan’s call invites us to reopen an unresolved debate that began even before President Joe Biden took the oath of office. Is the new president forging his own path in the Middle East, or is he following in the footsteps of Obama? Until now, those who feared that his presidency might become the third term of Obama fixed their wary eyes on Robert Malley, the president’s choice as Iran envoy. When serving in the Obama White House, Malley helped negotiate the Iran nuclear deal, which sought accommodations with Tehran that came at the expense of America’s allies in the Middle East. In a revealing *Foreign Affairs* article, written in 2019, Malley expressed regret that Obama

failed to arrive at more such accommodations. The direction of Obama’s policy was praiseworthy, Malley wrote, but his “moderation” was the enemy of his project. Being “a gradualist,” he presided over “an experiment that got suspended halfway through.”

Malley, the article leads one to assume, is now advising Biden to go all the way—and fast. But surely it is the president, not his Iran envoy, who determines the direction and pace of policy. Over the course of a career in Washington spanning nearly half a century, Biden has never cut a radical profile. Nor have Sullivan or Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The presence of this pair at Biden’s side signaled to many that Malley would not drive Iran policy. Shortly after the election, a veteran Washington insider noted to a journalist that “Blinken and Sullivan are certainly from the more moderate wing of the party, and that is reassuring.”

At his Senate confirmation hearing in January, Blinken continued to reassure by expressing his intention to fix the defects of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran nuclear deal is known. The following month, *Foreign Policy* reported that a split had opened up inside the government, with Sullivan and Blinken fulfilling the hopes placed on them. When Malley argued in favor of giving “inducements” to Iran to convince it to return quickly to the JCPOA, Sullivan and Blinken “dominated the discussion” by “toeing a harder line.”

Over the past month, that line became even harder—as in harder to see. On April 2, Malley gave an interview to PBS that raised eyebrows in Jerusalem, Riyadh, and in Congress. Ahead of nuclear talks in Vienna, where the

Europeans were about to host indirect negotiations between Biden officials and Iranian representatives about resurrecting the JCPOA, Malley expressed an eagerness to lift American sanctions on Iran and ensure “that Iran enjoys the benefits that it was supposed to enjoy under the deal.” About the interview, an anonymous senior Israeli official said, “If this is American policy, we are concerned.”

Israeli intelligence operatives put an exclamation point on that sentence when they (it seems clear) sabotaged a power generator at the Iranian nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz. While damaging Iran’s nuclear program, the operation also signaled Israeli opposition to the American position in the Vienna talks, now underway.

The alarm in Jerusalem is justified, if the May 1 statement by Abbas Araghchi, Iran’s lead negotiator in Vienna, is anything to go by. The American negotiators, he claimed, had already agreed in principle to remove sanctions on Iran’s energy sector, automotive industry, financial services, banking industry, and ports—to eliminate, in other words, all of the most significant economic sanctions ever imposed on Iran. Recent statements from Biden administration officials give us no reason to disbelieve Araghchi, and the smart money is now on a full resurrection of the JCPOA in relatively short order.

But even the Israelis have yet to absorb the full scope and magnitude of Biden’s accommodation of Iran. The problem is not that Sullivan and Blinken are failing to restrain Malley, but that they are marching in lockstep with him. A consensus reigns inside the administration, not just on the JCPOA but on every big question of Middle East strategy: Everyone from the president on down agrees about the need to complete what Obama started—which means that the worst is yet to come.

If the control that Obama’s project exercises over every mind in the Biden administration is not already obvious, it is because confusion still reigns about the project’s true nature. Doubt us? Then take the following one-question quiz: To what, precisely, was Robert Malley

referring when he spoke of Obama's half-completed "experiment"?

If you answered "the JCPOA," you got it wrong.

If you said "improving relations with Iran," you scored much higher, but you still failed.

The president's "ultimate goal," Malley wrote, was "to help the [Middle East] find a more stable balance of power that would make it less dependent on direct U.S. interference or protection." That is a roundabout way of saying that Obama dreamed of a new Middle Eastern order—one that relies more on partnership with Iran.

And the dream lives on. In May 2020, six months after Malley penned his *Foreign Affairs* essay, Jake Sullivan, writing as an adviser to Biden's presidential campaign, co-authored his own article laying out a Middle East strategy. The goal, he explained, is to be "less ambitious" militarily, "but more ambitious in using U.S. leverage and diplomacy to press for a de-escalation in tensions and eventually a new *modus vivendi* among the key regional actors." If we substitute the word "balance" for "*modus vivendi*," and if we recognize that "de-escalation" and "diplomacy" require cooperation with Iran, then Sullivan's vision is identical to Obama's "ultimate goal" as described by Malley. Sullivan emphasized that equivalence when he defined the objective of his plan as "changing the United States' role in a regional order it helped create."

This project to create a new Middle Eastern order, which now spans two presidential administrations, deserves a name. The "Obama-Biden-Malley-Blinken-Sullivan initiative" is quite a mouthful. Instead, we hereby dub it "the Realignment." That it should fall to us, and at this late date, to name a project on which many talented people have been working for the better part of a decade is more than a little odd. Typically, presidents launch initiatives as grand as this one with a major address, and they further embroider their vision with dozens of smaller speeches and interviews. One searches in vain for Obama's speech, "A New Order in the Middle East."

Obama, it seems clear, felt his project would advance best with stealth

and misdirection, not aggressive salesmanship. Biden, while keeping Obama's second-term foreign policy team nearly intact, is using the same playbook. He and his aides recognize that confusion about the "ultimate goal" makes achieving it easier. Indeed, confusion is the Realignment's best friend.

"Calculated to confuse" would make a fitting epitaph for the JCPOA—if ever it were to shuffle off this mortal coil. At 159 pages, containing five annexes, and replete with secret side deals, it packed into one binder enough smoke and mirrors to keep the American public confused for the past six years. Although the JCPOA is only one component of Obama's grand project, its role is indispensable.

Let's start with what the JCPOA does not do. Contrary to what its architects have claimed since 2015, the JCPOA does not block all the pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon. How could it? The deal's so-called "sunset provisions"—the clauses that eliminate all meaningful restrictions on Iran's nuclear program—will all have taken effect in less than a decade; some of the most significant restrictions will disappear by 2025. By 2031, the Islamic Republic will have, with international protection and assistance, an unfettered nuclear weapons program resting on an industrial-scale enrichment capability. On the basis of this fact alone, the best one can possibly say about the deal is that it buys a decade of freedom from Iranian nuclear extortion.

But even that modest claim does not withstand scrutiny. The deal permits a robust research and development program, and it does not destroy facilities (such as the fortified bunker in the mountains at Fordow) that are indisputably part of a military, not a civilian, nuclear program. In other words, Iran is pursuing its nuclear weapons ambitions even during this period of supposed restrictions, and its program is continuing, as any newspaper reader can see, to serve as a tool of extortion.

So blatant are the deal's failings that Biden officials do not deny the problem. Instead, they pretend to have a fix. Their plan? A "follow-on accord." The

JCPOA, they claim, is stage one in a multistage process, like a Silicon Valley product awaiting an upgrade.

It was Sullivan, in his *Foreign Affairs* article, who first floated the "follow-on" idea. Blinken then promised, at both his Senate confirmation hearing in January and a press conference on his first day on the job, to work for a "longer and stronger agreement."

"Lengthen and Strengthen with Sullivan and Blinken!" would make for a catchy slogan if JCPOA 2.0 actually had a chance in reality. But the Biden administration insists it will not raise the idea of a longer and stronger agreement until after the full restoration of JCPOA 1.0. However, as we noted, JCPOA 1.0 quickly expunges all significant limitations on Iran's nuclear program—permanently, and with an international seal of approval. By giving Tehran everything it ever wanted up front, JCPOA 1.0 obviates JCPOA 2.0.

Sullivan and Blinken profess to recognize the hideous flaws of the JCPOA, even as they sweat and toil to resurrect it from the tomb where Trump had buried it. The comfort they offered worried minds only increased when, according to the February *Foreign Policy* report, they overruled Malley, refusing Iran's demand that the United States lift all sanctions as a precondition for returning to the JCPOA. The men of understanding, we were led to believe, were also men with backbone.

But that report merely deflected watchful eyes from the real story: the bargaining between Washington and Tehran that started the minute the administration took office. Even before the Vienna negotiations began in April, messages were winging their way from Tehran to Washington, through intermediaries who interceded with ideas about how the United States could relax sanctions without formally lifting them.

As a result, Sullivan and Blinken delivered inducements to Tehran—and lots of them. To give just a few examples: The Biden administration dropped American objections to a \$5 billion International Monetary Fund loan to Iran. It rescinded the Trump-era policy at the United Nations, which had triggered the so-called snapback mechanism—a

move to reimpose international sanctions on Iran for its violation of the deal. It released frozen Iranian oil funds in South Korea, Iraq, and Oman. These steps portended the imminent end of the sanctions regime, thus encouraging the Chinese to buy Iranian oil at a much higher rate than at any time since 2017. Against this background came Malley's April 2 interview on PBS, in which he expressed an eagerness to lift all sanctions as quickly as possible.

The administration's enthusiasm for maximum accommodation of Iran came as a shock to many observers, among them Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, who released a statement accusing the administration of breaking its word. Inhofe, the Israelis, and countless others had mistaken Blinken's rhetoric for an actual plan to use the leverage built up by Trump to "fix" the nuclear deal.

To be fair, Blinken always said the administration intended to return to the JCPOA. About that, neither he nor Sullivan nor any other administration official ever lied. But they did strategically encourage people to believe things they knew were not, and never would be, true.

Their deceptions have gone far beyond narrow nuclear questions. Contrary to the claims of the administration, the JCPOA ends all of the most damaging sanctions on Iran—nuclear and non-nuclear alike. Thanks to one of its early sunset clauses, the JCPOA already ended an international ban on conventional arms sales to Iran, thus offering Tehran avenues for expanding its defense cooperation with Russia and China. As the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) will grow richer from oil sales, its international partnerships will also grow stronger. The network of militias surrounding Israel and America's Arab allies will expand, and their sting, delivered by precision-guided weaponry, will become more venomous. Compounded by the backing of powerful friends like Russia and China, the difficulty of containing Iran's regional project will increase. This analysis is not a theory; it is common sense.

The deceptions surrounding the

**“The deceptions surrounding the JCPOA have a clear purpose: to make the administration appear supportive of containment when, in fact, it is ending it.”**

JCPOA have a clear purpose: to make the administration appear supportive of containment when, in fact, it is ending it. But why are officials like Blinken and Sullivan so comfortable with such duplicity? Answering this question requires entering the Realignment mentality. The *Foreign Affairs* articles certainly offer one way in, but the most direct route is through the mind of Barack Obama, the author of the policy that Blinken and Sullivan are glossing.

The Realignment mentality fully crystalized on Aug. 31, 2013, the day Obama erased his red line on Syria's use of chemical weapons. Obama first drew the red line for U.S. military action in the summer of 2012, after receiving reports indicating that Syrian dictator Bashar Assad was either using or preparing to use chemical weapons against civilians. Some of Obama's advisers urged him, in response, to increase support for the rebels seeking to overthrow Assad. Instead, Obama drew his red line, hoping that Moscow and Tehran would restrain Assad and the White House would not be forced to take action. But almost exactly one year later, Assad dashed Obama's hopes with a sarin gas attack that killed hundreds of civilians, perhaps over a thousand.

Nevertheless, Obama was as determined as ever to prevent American

intervention in Syria—still with the assistance of Moscow and Tehran. What if, he asked himself, the United States were able to work in greater partnership with Russia and Iran to stabilize not just Syria but other trouble spots too? After all, a tacit U.S. arrangement with Iran already existed in Iraq, based on a supposed mutual hostility to Sunni jihadism. Couldn't that model be expanded to cover the entire Middle East? A partnership with Russia and Iran could stabilize this vexed region. An attack on Syria, however, would alienate both Moscow and Tehran, damaging Obama's dream of a new regional order.

As the American military readied a strike on Assad, Obama searched for a pretext to call it off. He found it by suddenly remembering his constitutional duty to seek congressional authorization for military operations. Republicans in Congress, Obama knew, would refuse to authorize military action, making them responsible for erasing his red line. The Republicans' refusal to strike, Obama told Ben Rhodes, an aide and member of his inner circle, "will drive a stake through the heart of neoconservatism—everyone will see they have no votes."

Obama had zero interest in weakening the Russian-Iranian entente. Instead, he sought to hobble the "correlation of forces" (to use the Soviet terminology) that he believed was boxing him in. Those forces included, in addition to a variety of groups in American domestic politics, traditional allies in the Middle East—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—all of whom were alarmed, each for its own reasons, by the rising power of the Russian-Iranian entente.

For his part, Russian leader Vladimir Putin understood Obama's dilemma. He quickly offered a fig leaf that Obama readily accepted. Together, the two pretended to strip Assad of his chemical weapons. We say "pretended," because the joint Russian-American initiative was a Potemkin facade designed to put an honorable face on Obama's retreat. In return for the prize of American abstention from Syria, Putin was more than happy to destroy some of Assad's chemical weapons.

But only some. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,

the group that carried out the joint American-Russian policy, only destroyed the chemical weapons that Assad officially declared. Of course, he didn't declare everything, a fact that became irrefutable in April 2017, when Assad conducted another sarin gas attack, this time killing almost 100 people.

For Obama, however, deterring Assad was always a secondary concern. He had now achieved what he saw as the biggest prize of all, namely, opening a path to a strategic accommodation with Iran, Russia's ally in Syria. "If the U.S. had intervened more forcefully in Syria," Rhodes told a reporter at the end of the Obama presidency, "it would have dominated Obama's second term and the JCPOA would have been impossible to achieve."

With the Syria example fixed in our minds, we are finally in a position to define what the JCPOA truly is rather than what it is not. As understood by its architects, the deal is two things at once. First, it is a vehicle for towing Iran's nuclear program out of the main lanes of U.S.-Iranian relations and parking it off to one side, thereby creating political and diplomatic space for greater interaction between Washington and Tehran—a fundamental condition for building the new regional order to which the Realignment aspires.

Second, it is a tool for erasing the containment option in American foreign policy. Many analysts have interpreted the elimination of nonnuclear sanctions by the JCPOA as the product of inept bargaining. Wily Iranian negotiators, we have frequently been told, hoodwinked the naïve Obama, who, poor man, just can't seem to get his head around the concept of leverage in negotiations.

On the contrary, a savvy Obama fooled the analysts by disguising the JCPOA as a nonproliferation agreement. In reality, the deal was a sneak attack on a traditional American foreign policy. It was and remains a Trojan horse designed to recast America's position and role in the Middle East. Sullivan and Blinken's task is to wheel the Trojan horse into the central square of American foreign policy and, by brandishing their "centrist" political credentials, sell

it as an imperfect but valuable vehicle of containment.

The doctrine of Realignment builds on the erroneous assumption that Iran is a status quo power, one that shares a number of major interests with the United States. According to this doctrine, conservative Americans and supporters of Israel fixate on Iran's ideology—which is steeped in bigotry toward non-Muslims in general, and which advertises its annihilationist aspirations toward the Jewish state in particular—but it is not useful as a practical guide to Tehran's behavior. That's what professor Obama taught us in a 2014 interview, when he claimed that Iran's leaders "are strategic," rational people who "respond to costs and benefits" and "to incentives."

U.S. allies needed to learn "to share the neighborhood" with Iran, he said in another interview. Their hostility was preventing Washington from gaining access to the more pragmatic dimensions of the Iranian government's character. Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia nurture paranoid fears, outsize ambitions, and grubby sectarian agendas that draw them into shadow wars with Iran. Out of excessive loyalty to its allies, America has allowed itself to be dragged into supporting their wars, needlessly embittering U.S.-Iranian relations while simultaneously exacerbating local conflicts.

According to the Realignment doctrine, America will help its allies protect their sovereign territory from Iranian or Iranian-backed attacks, but not compete with Iran beyond their borders. In the contested spaces of Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, the United States will force others to respect Iran's "equities," a term Obama once used to describe Iran's positions of power. Thus, in practical terms, America will use its influence to elevate the interests of Iran over those of U.S. allies in key areas of the Middle East.

At home, this policy is controversial, to say the least, and necessitates the development of tactics to camouflage the tilt toward Tehran. The presentation of the JCPOA as a narrow arms control agreement is the most important of

these tactics, but two others are particularly noteworthy.

The first is the bear hug: a squeeze that can be presented to the outside world as a gesture of love, but which immobilizes its recipient. The Obama administration perfected the move on Israel during JCPOA negotiations. American officials routinely bragged that they had raised military-to-military relations between the United States and Israel to glorious new heights. To be fair, the claim is not entirely baseless, thanks to joint projects such as the Iron Dome missile defense system, which allows Israel to protect its territory from Iranian-sponsored rocket attacks. But if Iron Dome was the seemingly loving aspect of the bear hug, the immobilizing part was the strong discouragement of Israeli military and intelligence operations against Iran's nuclear program and its regional military network. Obama made both seem less necessary by continually pointing to Iron Dome, which became a U.S. device for forcing Israel into a more passive posture in the face of Iran's rising power and continued aggression.

The bear hug is also a tool for gaslighting critics who accurately claim that the Realignment guts the policy of containment. The ongoing provision of American security assistance to allies allows the administration to plausibly claim that containment is alive and well—that the United States is indeed "pushing back" against Iran's "destabilizing activities," and that far from discarding its old allies, it is committed to their welfare.

The second tactic is the values feint. When Washington tilts toward Iran, it disguises its true motivations with pronouncements of high-minded humanitarianism—ceasing to be a superpower and instead becoming a Florence Nightingale among the nations, decrying human suffering and repeating mantras like "There is no military solution to this conflict." The values feint exhorts allies, in public, not to retreat before Iran but to engage in the "three D's": diplomacy, dialogue, and de-escalation. This trio, first deployed by Obama in Syria, now routinely rolls off the tongues of Biden officials who, in keeping with a plan presented in Sullivan's *Foreign Affairs*



article, are busy encouraging America's allies to sit down and negotiate with the Iranians.

"We support any Iranian dialogue with international, regional, or Arab powers," Hassan Nasrallah said last week. "We consider it as helpful to calming tension in the region." The leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, the most lethal Iranian-backed militia in the Arab world, strongly approves of the Sullivan plan. And why wouldn't he? The three D's transform Iran and its proxies into America's partners in "peace" diplomacy, and those seeking to contain them into bloodthirsty enemies of peace.

Now that we can see past the cute tricks that hide the Realignment's true goals, we can state its four strategic imperatives in plain English: First, allow Tehran an unfettered nuclear weapons program by 2031; second, end the sanctions on the Iranian economic and financial system; third, implement a policy of accommodation of Iran and its tentacles in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon; and fourth, force that policy on America's closest allies. If the United States follows those commandments, then a kind of natural regional balance will fall into place. The United States, so the thinking goes, will then finally remove itself from the war footing that traditional allies, with their anti-Iran agenda, have forced on it. Thereafter, diplomatic engagement with Iran will be the primary tool needed to maintain regional stability. (If you doubt us on this, give Malley's and Sullivan's *Foreign Affairs* articles a closer read.)

The Realignment rests on, to put it mildly, a hollow theory. It misstates the nature of the Islamic Republic and the scope of its ambitions. A regime that has led "Death to America" chants for the last 40 years is an inveterately revisionist regime. The Islamic Republic sees itself as a global power, the leader of the Muslim world, and it covets hegemony over the Persian Gulf—indeed, the entire Middle East. But the only instrument it has ever had to achieve its objectives is regional subversion.

Ayatollah Khamenei, the head of this colossal project, is a lord of chaos. After oil, the Islamic Republic's major export item is the IRGC-commanded terrorist

**"Iran is strong enough to be a major factor in every troubled corner of the Middle East, but not strong enough to build an alternative order."**

militia—the only export that Iran consistently produces at a peerless level. Malley and Sullivan got it exactly wrong when they argued, in effect, that allies are suckering the United States into conflict with Iran. It is not the allies but the Islamic Republic that is blanketing the Arab world with terrorist militias, arming them with precision-guided weapons, and styling the alliance it leads as "the Resistance Axis." It does so for one simple reason: It is out to destroy the American order in the Middle East.

Iran's militia network and nuclear program have made it strong enough to be a major factor in every troubled corner of the Middle East, but not strong enough to build an alternative order. Herein lies a curious contradiction in Khamenei's project. Iran cannot actually hold or stabilize contested areas without a helpful American posture.

This same contradiction bedevils the Realignment, whose architects think that partnership with Iran is the ticket to ending American military interventions in the Middle East. But the experiences of both Iraq and Syria proved the fallacy of this vision. On Obama's watch, when the U.S. withdrew its troops from Iraq, Iran's influence increased exponentially. And what happened? Iran-backed militias sprouted like weeds across the landscape. The ensuing chaos

created the vacuum which the Islamic State filled, forcing Obama to re-intervene militarily—but now with the American military serving, in effect, as the air force of Iran's militias. Obama didn't end military interventions; he just switched sides.

An analogous process took place in Syria. In order to save the Assad regime, Iran needed not just the intervention of the Russian military to shore up its position against the Syrian opposition forces, but the assistance of the United States. Obama kept both Turkey and Israel at bay while the Russians, Iranians, and Iran's militias slaughtered over 500,000 people and uprooted 10 million more from their homes.

Obama and his staffers, who are now Biden's staffers, already tested the potential of Realignment. It brought only suffering and death, not to mention a general weakening of the American position.

Domestic politics partially explains the hold that this empty theory exercises over otherwise bright minds. The Realignment was the signature initiative of Barack Obama, who remains either the most powerful man in Democratic politics or a very close second. By winning the presidency, Biden is the leader of the party today, but he owes much of his personal popularity as well as his victory itself to his former boss.

The organizational chart of the State Department says that Malley reports to the secretary of state. What the chart does not reveal is that Malley, as the keeper of Obama's Iran flame, reports to Blinken, in effect, through Obama. As for Sullivan, he reports to Biden directly, but his ability to deviate from Obama's agenda is limited by a simple fact of life. As Sullivan himself observed in a December interview, "We've reached a point where foreign policy is domestic policy, and domestic policy is foreign policy."

Biden won the electoral college by only 45,000 votes spread over three states—a razor thin margin. He still desperately needs the support of Obama, who alone can bridge the Democratic Party's progressive and Clintonian wings. Moreover, if power is the ability

to convince people that their success in the future requires keeping you happy in the present, then Obama has a lot of direct power over Sullivan. If Sullivan aspires to one day serve as secretary of state or secretary of defense, he knows that Obama will remain a power broker in Democratic politics long after Biden has left the scene.

The political heft of the Realignment derives not just from Obama's personal support but also from the support of progressives whose cosmology it affirms. It equates a policy of containing Iran with a path to endless war, and transforms a policy of accommodating Iran into the path to peace. It reduces the complexities of the Middle East to a Manichean morality tale that pits the progressives against their mythological foes—Evangelical Christians, “neoconservatives,” and Zionists. The Realignment depicts these foes as co-conspirators with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, plotting to keep America mired in the Middle East.

The role that the Realignment casts for Israel bears close scrutiny. Jake Sullivan's *Foreign Affairs* article called for preventing U.S. allies from holding American policy “hostage to maximalist regional demands” regarding the JCPOA. Yet Sullivan all but abstained from mentioning Israel, the country that has been most vocal and effective at making such demands. This omission is, of course, no accident.

Contemporary progressivism is, shall we say, less than enthusiastic about Zionism. One of its cherished goals is to reduce American support for Israel, and the Realignment helps it realize that ambition—but it does so slyly. It refrains from making its anti-Zionism explicit for fear of stirring up opposition to the project among the largely pro-Israel American people. But by upgrading relations with Iran, the Realignment perforce downgrades the Jewish state.

How Israel responds to this downgrading will depend on how its prolonged domestic crisis, marked by four national elections in two years' time, finally gets resolved. Netanyahu hatters in the Biden administration will be sure to delight if he is toppled from

power and succeeded by someone with less foreign policy experience, such as Yair Lapid, the chairman of the Yesh Atid party. The White House believes that a post-Netanyahu Israel will work to accommodate its main demands. If, however, Netanyahu remains in power (or if he is succeeded by someone with a similar disposition on Iran), then the Israelis will not readily accept the diminished role assigned to them by the Realignment.

As Biden moves swiftly to put Netanyahu (or a like-minded successor) in a bear hug, the Israeli prime minister will bend, twist, squirm, and occasionally throw a sharp elbow and kick a shin. Both Biden and Netanyahu, each for his own domestic reasons, will deny the depth of the conflict. Broad smiles, professions of friendship, and much fancy footwork, all produced for the benefit of the cameras, will turn this wrestling match into a contorted tango.

Their dance will move through five flashpoints—the five irresolvable tensions between Jerusalem and Washington that the Realignment creates. The first is, of course, the JCPOA. The Israelis, for their part, will try to prevent the quarrel from poisoning cooperation in general, but will not refrain from exposing the defects of the deal to the world, and especially to Congress. The JCPOA breathes an air of distrust into U.S.-Israel relations, which will thicken as Israel continues to conduct covert actions inside Iran. The Biden team's response, as we have already seen, will be to urge restraint on Jerusalem, thus generating the second flashpoint.

The primary goal of Israeli covert operations has historically been to sabotage Iran's nuclear program, but more recently, they have also served as a means to publicize the flaws of the JCPOA and to expose Iranian cheating. The covert Israeli campaign now also serves as propaganda by action, showcasing opposition to Biden's Realignment. The recent sabotage of the Natanz nuclear facility's power station, a case in point, coincided not just with the negotiations in Vienna over the JCPOA, but also with the visit of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Jerusalem. The operation embarrassed Washington, not least by refuting its

contention that the only way to prevent war is to legitimize Iran's nuclear program. If diminutive Israel can sabotage Iran's most secure facilities on its own without sparking a war, how much more could it accomplish with the active assistance of the United States?

For its part, the Biden administration responded to the embarrassment by issuing a private rebuke to Jerusalem, while calling for more coordination and an agreed policy of “no surprises.” A similar dynamic is playing out over the third flashpoint—namely, the clash between Washington and Jerusalem over Israeli attacks on Iranian military targets in Syria and elsewhere in the region. A meeting in April between Sullivan and his Israeli counterpart, Meir Ben-Shabbat, established “an interagency working group” to focus on the threat of Iranian-produced precision-guided missiles, which Tehran provides to its regional assets. The White House will spin the working group as a united effort to “push back” on Iran, but it is actually a tool for monitoring and restraining Israel.

As the pressure from Washington to support the three D's mounts, Jerusalem will search for partners who can assist it, both in containing Iran and in persuading the United States to abandon the Realignment. Impediments to effective coordination between Riyadh and Jerusalem abound, but the Saudis remain the most likely candidate, as there is still a chance that shared circumstances will force closer coordination between the two. But the Biden team will monitor relations between Riyadh and Jerusalem and interdict when necessary—thus creating the fourth flash point.

It was, once again, the Obama administration that fashioned the template for such interdiction. In 2012, when Washington grew fearful that Israel might launch an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, four senior U.S. diplomats and military intelligence officials briefed *Foreign Policy* on alleged cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel in preparation for the attack. “The Israelis have bought an airfield,” one anonymous official said, “and the airfield is called Azerbaijan.” Officials in Baku categorically denied the report, which indeed was likely

bogus. But the point was to intimidate Jerusalem and any of its potential anti-Iran partners, not to put out truthful information.

The final flashpoint will be the Palestinian question. As tensions with Jerusalem rise over Iran, the administration will execute its values feint, criticizing Israel for choosing the path of “war.” But it will be over the Palestinian issue that the Biden team will deliver the harshest public scolding. The issue helps camouflage American rage over Israel’s independent Iran policy, presenting it instead as a righteous fight over “values.”

The administration wasted no time in reviving this values conflict. On April 7, Blinken resumed U.S. funding for the Palestinian leadership that the Trump administration had cut, including for the controversial United Nations Relief and Works Agency, saying it “aligns with the values and interests of our allies” (as defined solely by the Biden administration, he neglected to add). Gilad Erdan, Israel’s ambassador to the United States and the United Nations, quickly clarified that “Israel is strongly opposed to the anti-Israel and antisemitic activity happening in UNRWA’s facilities.”

Elevating the Palestinian question to the top of U.S.-Israel relations will further reduce the chance of a bilateral Saudi-Israeli breakthrough. Any efforts to advance the Abraham Accords, or to thwart the White House’s Iran policy, will be met with rebukes that Israel is trying to detract from justice for the Palestinians. The launch of another round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations might be one way for the Biden team to lend plausibility to this claim. Given the failure of previous rounds, however, Biden may instead choose to launch talks with Israelis and Palestinians about how to preserve the two-state solution in the absence of a peace process. From any such talks, demands on Israel to take impossible actions will flow like a gusher, allowing Washington to pose as the champion of Palestinian rights against the recalcitrant Israelis.

With the stage thus set, an echo chamber of “independent” voices in the media will deliver a harsh reproach to Israel, which the Biden team will have scripted but will prefer not to deliver directly.

“The United States needs to tell Israeli leaders to cease provocative settlement construction and ... oppressive security practices,” wrote Obama’s CIA director, John Brennan, in *The New York Times* on April 27. This was an early warning. As the tensions between Jerusalem and Washington mount, voices shriller than Brennan’s will decry the Israelis as corrupt and cruel warmongers, sabotaging not just peace diplomacy, but also mom and apple pie.

For the pro-Israel community, the Realignment represents both an intellectual and political challenge. Intellectually, it forces a rethinking of what constitutes a pro-Israel policy. Traditionally, a position passes this litmus test if it supports strong bilateral ties, including the provision of American military aid. But supporters of the Realignment—by guaranteeing Israel’s qualitative military edge and right to defend itself, and by verbally affirming the enduring strength of American-Israeli bonds—easily pass this test, even as they empower Iran across the Middle East and provide it with a pathway to a nuclear weapon. To give the term “pro-Israel” a definition that meets the challenge of the day requires advocating for the containment of Iran, not just the defense of Israel, and for a peace strategy that focuses on Saudi Arabia.

For Jewish Democrats especially, this definition poses a severe political challenge. Progressives and Biden surrogates will attack this definition of “pro-Israel” as the “Trumpist” version, which to them means repudiating American values, choosing war over diplomacy, whitewashing Saudi “crimes,” and helping Israeli settlers “colonize” the Palestinians.

Some supporters of the administration will not hesitate to accuse Jews of sending American men and women in uniform to die for Israel. In 2018, when the Mossad spirited the nuclear archive from Tehran, Colin Kahl, a Stanford professor and Biden’s former national security adviser, tweeted that the Israeli operation “sure has an eerie pre-2003 Iraq vibe to it.” In other words, the Israeli intelligence operation, a heroic feat straight out of a Hollywood movie, was

a Jewish plot to sucker America into a war for Israel. Kahl is now Joe Biden’s undersecretary of defense for policy, the third most powerful person in the Pentagon. During his Senate confirmation process, Kahl’s supporters defended him against the accusation that he harbored an anti-Israel bias by noting that, under Obama, he helped advance American-Israeli cooperation on Iron Dome.

As the pro-Israel community debates what constitutes sensible policy, its right and left wings are gearing up for a fight. Enter: Sullivan and Blinken. They move between the bickering factions, holding up their arms in a plea for calm. The duo have exactly what it takes to forge a third way between Trump’s “maximum pressure” and Obama’s Realignment—a Clintonian way that will square the circle, thread the needle, and ride two horses at once. Don’t brawl with each other, they say. Don’t split your community. Rest assured, we have your back. We have no illusions about Iran. Our commitment to Israel’s security remains unyielding.

Wouldn’t it be nice to believe all that? Unfortunately, this third way is a myth—and a dangerous one at that. It is buying time and goodwill for an administration that, as it races hell-for-leather to finish what Obama started, deserves neither.

The Realignment is just clever enough to be stupid on a grand scale. When Malley refers to Obama’s presidency as a half-finished experiment, he means, more specifically, that the United States failed to compel its Middle Eastern allies to accommodate Iran. Washington, he explained in his *Foreign Affairs* article, must stop “giving its partners carte blanche” and “enabling their more bellicose actions” directed at Iran and its proxies. The ally who needs its blank check revoked most urgently, Malley explains, is Saudi Arabia, and the arena in which to start is Yemen. Washington, he wrote bluntly, must press Riyadh “to bring the conflict to an end.”

Sullivan’s *Foreign Affairs* article took this idea further, developing the plan for pressing Riyadh to end the war in Yemen. The United States, he explained, should tell the Saudis in no uncertain terms that a failure to end

the intervention would put at risk the American security guarantee for Saudi Arabia. According to Sullivan, Washington must “insist on serious, good-faith Saudi diplomatic efforts to end the Yemen war and de-escalate with Iran as part of the terms under which it maintains a complement of U.S. troops deployed in Saudi Arabia.” To sustain this “de-escalation,” the U.S. must then press Riyadh to enter into “dialogue” with Tehran.

Clearly, the plan to give a rib-cracking bear hug to Saudi Arabia was in place long before the election of Biden. Once the new team took office, it lost no time in putting on the squeeze. On Jan. 27, the administration announced a freeze on arms sales. On Feb. 4, it declared an end to support for “offensive” operations in Yemen. On Feb. 5, it expressed its intentions to remove the Houthis, Iran’s proxy in Yemen, from the terrorism list, and on Feb. 16, it made good on its promise.

Taking a leaf from Obama’s Syria playbook, the Biden administration thus recognized Yemen as a de facto Iranian sphere of interest. However, the slogan of the Houthi movement—“Allah is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam”—does not poll well among a majority of American voters. To disguise the fact that its policies are empowering the Houthis and the Iranians, the Biden administration deployed the values feint.

The goal of the decision to lift the terrorism designation on the Houthis, Blinken explained, was to alleviate “the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen.” The administration came to the decision, he said, because it listened to the United Nations, humanitarian groups, and bipartisan members of Congress, all of whom had warned that designating the Houthis as terrorists “could have a devastating impact on Yemenis’ access to basic commodities like food and fuel.”

The Yemen values feint is a full-spectrum affair, with America not just celebrating itself as Florence Nightingale, but disparaging Saudi Arabia as a malevolent beast. On Feb. 26, the Biden administration released a declassified intelligence report on the killing of

Jamal Khashoggi, the columnist whom a team of Saudi operatives killed in Istanbul in 2018. The report, which concluded that the crown prince approved the assassination, came in response to no new developments. The administration dredged up the 2-year-old file purely in order to use it as fodder in a values barrage.

The crown prince, for his part, was in no doubt about the true reason for this salvo. “We are seeking to have good relations with Iran,” he said in a major television interview at the end of April. “We aim to see a prosperous Iran. We are working with our partners in the region to overcome our differences with Iran.”

But on March 7, two weeks after the release of the Khashoggi report, the administration’s values guns fell conspicuously silent. On that day, dozens of Ethiopian migrants in a detention center in Sanaa, Yemen, protested their unbearable living conditions. Their Houthi guards corralled the protesters into a hangar, told them to say their “final prayers,” and tossed explosive grenades into the structure. “[P]eople were roasted alive,” said one of the survivors. “I had to step on their dead bodies to escape.” Nary a peep was heard in Washington about this attack, let alone about the Houthi military campaign in Yemen which redoubled thanks to America’s green light.

By rewarding Iranian aggression, the Realignment’s faux humanitarianism only brings greater suffering to the people whose afflictions it pretends to alleviate. The sanctimonious policy simply ensures that Iran will enjoy a permanent Arabian base for launching strikes against America’s most important Arab ally, Saudi Arabia.

The tilt toward Iran in Yemen also has sinister implications for America’s rivalry with its greatest competitor in the world today. China and Iran recently signed a 25-year “strategic partnership” that funnels hundreds of millions of dollars into Iran, helping Tehran expand its nuclear power program, modernize its ports, and develop its energy sector. The deal also includes greater cooperation on defense and the transfer of Chinese military technology. Meanwhile,

Beijing is upgrading its naval base in Djibouti, building a dock that can accommodate aircraft carriers 20 miles from Yemen across the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which controls the approaches to the Suez Canal from the Indian Ocean. With each passing day, the prospect of a Chinese-Iranian alliance capable of dominating the strait increases.

The expansion of Tehran’s strategic cooperation with Beijing immediately after the election of Biden mirrors the cooperation with Moscow that followed the completion of the JCPOA in 2015. Iran’s growing international partnerships, themselves a product of the Realignment, only strengthen Tehran’s resolve to destroy the American regional security system. The Islamic Republic is an unappeasable power. Khamenei will pocket every concession that America offers and then demand more—in blood.

Yet it is with supreme confidence that the supporters of Realignment present their policy. They make as if the superiority of their method has been proven—as if we can all see that their formula will take America off its war footing, and stabilize the Middle East, and protect America’s interests, and safeguard its closest allies. Not only is the claim too good to be true, but there is simply no evidentiary basis for it—zero. If any evidence did exist, the supporters of Realignment would make their argument honestly and forthrightly and stop hiding behind a high wall of cute deceptions.

The same supreme confidence also characterizes the Biden team’s attitude toward Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign, which it derides as reckless, incoherent, and ineffective. On Trump’s watch, the Iranian economy suffered catastrophic losses. Not only did anti-regime demonstrations break out in every major Iranian city in 2019, but corresponding protests erupted in Iraq, aimed directly or indirectly at Iran’s proxies there. But Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy was much more than just the imposition of economic sanctions. It also included direct American military action, support for military action by allies, unilateral American covert operations, and support for

the covert operations of allies—all of which the Realignment is bringing to an abrupt end.

Most impressive of all was the blow that Trump delivered to the IRGC, the most feared element in a regime that, increasingly, rules through fear alone. Trump ended the fiction, which had greatly benefited Iran, that its proxies were independent actors rather than direct arms of the IRGC. This policy of holding Iran directly responsible culminated in the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC's Quds Force and the second most powerful man in Iran.

Meanwhile, the Israelis (presumably) escalated their covert campaign of sabotage and intelligence collection against Iran's nuclear program. Earlier in Trump's presidency, they damaged dozens of sensitive Iranian facilities and captured its nuclear archive. In a dramatic operation, they killed Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the head of Iran's nuclear program. To the best of our knowledge, Iran has apprehended no Israeli operatives, who apparently have the run of the entire country.

By penetrating Iran's defenses, Israel—with the support of the Trump administration—shredded Obama's major justification for the JCPOA by demonstrating that the United States can manage the Iran challenge, including its nuclear dimension, with a relatively light American military commitment. The networks inside Iran sabotaging the nuclear program are not American; they are Israeli. By supporting America's ally, Trump did not get suckered into unwanted conflicts; he empowered others to do America's work for it.

Trump followed the example of all U.S. presidents prior to Obama, who conceived of the Middle East as a rectangular table, with America and its traditional allies seated on one side, and America's rivals, including Iran and Russia, on the other. The job of the United States, in this time-honored conception, is twofold: to mediate among the allies, who are a fractious lot, and to support them against the opposing side.

"Maximum pressure" was a form of collective security. It encouraged closer cooperation between American allies,

and therefore played a major role in the Abraham Accords, the peace agreements leading to expanded cultural, economic, and military ties between Israel and Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Sudan—all of which are close to Saudi Arabia. None would have normalized relations with Israel if Riyadh had opposed the move. The next logical step in the process, and the strategic prize of the effort, was for the next U.S. president to advance the Israeli-Saudi rapprochement.

It is impossible to exaggerate the value to the United States of a full-blown Saudi-Israeli peace agreement or even of significant steps in that direction. The 9/11 attacks announced that a doctrine of radical intolerance had taken deeper root inside the Muslim world than we had realized—a doctrine that seeks to wall off Muslim societies from non-Muslim influences. The Emiratis, the lead players in the Abraham Accords, see peace with Israel as part of a multipronged effort to refute this intolerant view of Islam and Muslim history. Saudi Arabia is the most powerful Arab country and, thanks to its guardianship of Mecca and Medina, one of the most influential countries in the entire Muslim world. It has also long been the fortress of conservative Islamic jurisprudence and Quranic literalism. If the country toward which all Muslims pray five times a day, and to which some 2 million make annual pilgrimages, develops openly friendly relations with the Jewish state, the implications for relations between Muslims and non-Muslims everywhere would be profound.

Yet the Biden administration has forbidden its officials from even using the term "Abraham Accords," which, under the influence of the Realignment, it abhors. Because the accords are politically popular, even in Democratic circles, the administration will refrain from expressing its abhorrence frankly, and will look for every opportunity to claim that it looks favorably on the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

In reality, however, the Biden team has no intention to expand the Abraham Accords, whose very existence is a blot on the Democrats' record. It refutes the dogma preached by the Obama

administration that peace between Israel and the Arab world must begin with a Palestinian-Israeli agreement.

More importantly, the accords are also a threat to the Realignment itself. The Saudi-Israeli thaw resulted in part from the sense of threat they share about the rise of Iran, and the increasing unreliability of the American security guarantee. A strong partnership between Riyadh and Jerusalem would inevitably become the primary node of opposition to the Realignment from within the American alliance system. A desire to end any unsupervised discussion of expanding the Abraham Accords is probably an additional reason why the Biden administration devoted its first days in office to publicly disparaging Mohammed bin Salman and privately pressing him to kowtow to Tehran. "Do not dare assist Israel" was another implicit command that the Khashoggi values barrage delivered to Riyadh.

When Biden took office, he faced a fork in the road. On one path stood a multilateral alliance designed to contain Iran. It had a proven track record of success and plans of even better things to come, as the recent act of sabotage at Natanz demonstrated. The alliance's leading members were beckoning Biden to work against a common foe, but also to promote greater cooperation and possibly even an official peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. On the other path stood the Islamic Republic, hated by its own people and, indeed, by most people in the Middle East. It offered nothing but the same vile message it had always espoused. Standing with it were all of the most malignant forces in the Middle East, who either look directly to Tehran for leadership or thrive on the chaos it sows.

Biden chose Iran, fracturing the U.S. alliance system and setting back the cause of peace. His choice also delivered a victory to China and Russia, who are working with Iran, each in its own way, toward America's undoing. In a perverse effort to liberate itself from its allies, the United States is soiling its own nest. ■

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# The Turn

When I saw the left give up everything I believe in, I changed politically. You can, too.

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

**M**erchandise lies in a looted souvenir and electronics shop near New York's Times Square after a night of protests and vandalism over the death of George Floyd, June 2, 2020. John Moore/Getty Images

For many years—most of my politically cognizant life, in fact—I felt secure in my politics. Truth and justice, I believed, leaned leftward. If you were some version of a decent human being, you cared about those less fortunate than you, which meant that you supported a whole host of measures designed to even the playing field a little. Sometimes, these measures had unintended consequences (see under: Stalin, Josef), but that wasn't reason enough to despair of the long march to equality. Besides, there was hardly an alternative: On the other end of the political transom lurked despicable creeps, right-wing orcs who either cared for nothing but their own petty financial interests or, worse, pined for benighted isms that preached prejudice and hate. We were on the right side of history. We were the people. We were the ones giving peace a chance. And, no matter the present, we were always the future.

This belief carried me through high school, and a brief stint in a socialist youth movement. It accelerated me in college, sending me anywhere from joint marches with Palestinians to a two-week hunger strike in Jerusalem trying (and failing) to lower tuition for underprivileged students. It pulled me to New York, to Columbia University, to more left-wing politics and activism

and raging against Republicans whose agenda, especially in the 2000s, seemed like nothing more than greed and war.

And it wasn't just an ideology, some abstract set of convictions that were accessible only through cracking open dusty old books. It was the animating spirit of life itself: The dinner parties I attended on the Upper West Side required dismissive comments on President Bush just as much as they did a bit of wine to make the evening bright, and there was no faster or surer way to signal to a new acquaintance that you were a kindred spirit than praising the latest *Times* editorial. It wasn't performative, exactly. At least, it felt real enough, the reverent rites of a good group of people protecting itself against the bad guys.

I embraced my people, and my people embraced me. They gave me everything I had always imagined I wanted: a Ph.D. from an Ivy League university; a professorship at NYU, complete with a roomy office overlooking Washington Square Park; book deals; columns in smart little publications; invitations to the sort of soirees where you could find yourself seated next to Salman Rushdie or Susan Sontag or any number of the men and women you grew up reading and admiring. The list goes on. Life was good. I was grateful.

And then came The Turn. If you've lived through it yourself, you know that The Turn doesn't happen overnight, that it isn't easily distilled into one dramatic breakdown moment, that it happens hazily and over time—first a twitch, then a few more, stretching into a gnawing discomfort and then, eventually, a sense of panic.

You may be among the increasing

numbers of people going through The Turn right now. Having lived through the turmoil of the last half decade—through the years of MAGA and antifa and rampant identity politics and, most dramatically, the global turmoil caused by COVID-19—more and more of us feel absolutely and irreparably politically homeless. Instinctively, we looked to the Democratic Party, the only home we and our parents and their parents before them had ever known or seriously considered. But what we saw there—and in the newspapers we used to read, and in the schools whose admission letters once made us so proud—was terrifying. However we tried to explain what was happening on “the left,” it was hard to convince ourselves that it was right, or that it was something we still truly believed in. That is what The Turn is about.

You might be living through The Turn if you ever found yourself feeling like free speech should stay free even if it offended some group or individual but now can't admit it at dinner with friends because you are afraid of being thought a bigot. You are living through The Turn if you have questions about public health policies—including the effects of lockdowns and school closures on the poor and most vulnerable in our society—but can't ask them out loud because you know you'll be labeled an anti-vaxxer. You are living through The Turn if you think that burning down towns and looting stores isn't the best way to promote social justice, but feel you can't say so because you know you'll be called a white supremacist. You are living through The Turn if you seethed watching a terrorist organization attack the world's only Jewish state, but seethed silently because your colleagues were all on Twitter and Facebook sharing celebrity memes about ending Israeli apartheid while having little interest in American kids dying on the streets because of failed policies. If you've felt yourself unable to speak your mind, if you have a queasy feeling that your friends might disown you if you shared your most intimately held concerns, if you are feeling a bit breathless and a bit hopeless and entirely unsure what on



earth is going on, I am sorry to inform you that The Turn is upon you.

The Turn hit me just a beat before it did you, so I know just how awful it feels. It's been years now, but I still remember the time a dear friend and mentor took me to lunch and warned me, sternly and without any of the warmth you'd extend to someone you truly loved, to watch what I said about Israel. I still remember how confusing and painful it felt to know that my beliefs—beliefs, mind you, that, until very recently, were so obvious and banal and widely held on the left that they were hardly considered beliefs at all—now labeled me an outcast. The Turn brings with it the sort of pain most of us don't feel as adults; you'd have to go all the way back to junior high, maybe, to recall a stabbing sensation quite as deep and confounding as watching your friends all turn on you and decide that you're not worthy of their affection any more. It's the kind of primal rejection that is devastating precisely because it forces you to rethink everything, not only your convictions about the world but also your idea of yourself, your values, and your priorities. We all want to be embraced. We all want the men and women we consider most swell to approve of us and confirm that we, too, are good and great. We all want the love and the laurels; The Turn takes both away.

But, having been there before, I have one important thing to tell you: If the left is going to make it “right wing” to simply be decent, then it's OK to be right.

Why? Because, after 225 long and fruitful years of this terminology, “right” and “left” are now empty categories, meaning little more than “the blue team” and “the green team” in your summer camp's color war. You don't get to be “against the rich” if the richest people in the country fund your party in order to preserve their government-sponsored monopolies. You are not “a supporter of free speech” if you oppose free speech for people who disagree with you. You are not “for the people” if you pit most of them against each other based on the color of their

“It doesn't matter what good people ‘on the left’ believed and did 60 or 70 years ago.”

skin, or force them out of their jobs because of personal choices related to their bodies. You are not “serious about economic inequality” when you happily order from Amazon without caring much for the devastating impact your purchases have on the small businesses that increasingly are either subjugated by Jeff Bezos' behemoth or crushed by it altogether. You are not “for science” if you refuse to consider hypotheses that don't conform to your political convictions and then try to ban critical thought and inquiry from the internet. You are not “anti-racist” if you label—and sort!—people by race. You are not “against conformism” when you scare people out of voicing dissenting opinions.

When “the left” becomes the party of wealthy elites and state security agencies who preach racial division, state censorship, contempt for ordinary citizens and for the U.S. Constitution, and telling people what to do and think at every turn, then that's the side you are on, if you are “on the left”—those are the policies and beliefs you stand for and have to defend. It doesn't matter what good people “on the left” believed and did 60 or 70 years ago. Those people are dead now, mostly. They don't define “the left” anymore than Abraham Lincoln defines the modern-day

Republican Party or Jimi Hendrix defines Nickelback.

So look at the list of things supported by the left and ask yourself: Is that me? If the answer is yes, great. You've found a home. If the answer is no, don't let yourself be defined by an empty word. Get out. And once you're out, don't let anyone else define you, either. Not being a left-wing racist or police state fan doesn't make you a white supremacist or a Trump worshipper, either. Only small children, machines, and religious fanatics think in binaries.

Which isn't to diminish the anger, hurt, and confusion you're feeling just now. But it's worth understanding that your story has a happy ending. The freedom you feel on the other side is so real it's physical, like emerging from a long stretch underwater and taking that first deep breath in the cool afternoon air. None of it makes the lost friends or the lost career opportunities any less painful; but there's no more potent source of renewable energy than liberty, and your capacity to reinvent—yourself, your group, your life—is greater than you realize.

So welcome to the right side, friend, and join us in laughing at all the idiotic name-calling that is applied, with increasing hysteria, to try and stop more and more normal Americans from joining our ranks. Fascists? Conspiracy theorists? Anti-science racist TERFs? Whatever. We have a better word to describe ourselves: free. ■

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 **TABLET RECIPES**

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# No More ADL

When it comes to Jews, the organization now does more harm than good

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

**P**op quiz:  
Which of these two individuals do you find more problematic?

Kyrie Irving, a kooky basketball player who believes that the Earth is flat, that JFK was shot by bankers, that the COVID vaccines were secretly a plot to connect all Black people to a supercomputer, and that Jews worship Satan and launched the slave trade?

Or Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, who accepted \$500,000 from Irving last week without even meeting or even talking to the all-star—and who was then forced to give back the donation when Irving blatantly refused to apologize?

Let's think about it for a minute. One of these guys is a weirdo with dumb opinions he may or may not actually believe. The other is running a soulless racket which just made it clear that you can say whatever you want about the Jews and buy your indulgences at a discount price.

Don't get me wrong: I absolutely believe that Irving's endorsement of a Black nationalist documentary based on an obscure Jew-hating book, to say nothing of Kanye West's meltdown, will most likely contribute to a surge in antisemitism in America, particularly in the Black community. But we Jews don't control Kyrie Irving; in theory, we do control the ADL, and we shouldn't want our chief defense group to behave in a way that advances antisemitic conspiracy theories about shadowy Jews trafficking in money and influence for fun and profit.

All of this leads to one sorry conclusion: It's time to say goodbye to the ADL. It can't be killed, so we need to

just walk away from this formerly venerable organization, and weaken it before it swerves so far off the road that it takes us with it.

If you think the above is hyperbole, or if you haven't been paying much attention to the ADL lately and still imagine it as a paragon of the good fight against antisemitism, here's a sizzle reel of Greenblatt's years in office. Since leaving the Obama White House and taking over the organization in 2015, Greenblatt has turned the ADL into a partisan attack machine, fueled by corporate cash and increasingly oblivious to any real suffering of any real Jews.

Need some proof? Here we go.

In 2017, the ADL issued a guide to America's worst antisemites, a 36 (double Chai!) person rogues' gallery. Louis Farrakhan, the Black supremacist beloved by celebrities, wasn't on it. Nor was the Oberlin professor who argued that 9/11 was a Jewish conspiracy. Nor Linda Sarsour of the Women's March, who argued you can't be both a Zionist and a feminist, because the former makes you somehow less than human, and who equated Zionism with neo-Nazism. Instead, the ADL picked a posse of minor right-wing nutjobs and no one else. Unironically, it called its guide "Naming the Hate."

In 2018, the organization came under scrutiny for flubbing its reporting on antisemitic attacks—the group's bread-and-butter and a major source of its centurylong trust and prestige—perhaps to further the false impression that Jews were under attack by hordes of white supremacists heartened by the rise and rhetoric of Donald Trump.

In 2020, Greenblatt signed on to a campaign calling on Facebook to censor pro-Trump ads. His partner in this

assault on free and political speech? Incredibly, it was Al Sharpton—who has still not publicly apologized for his role in inciting the Crown Heights pogroms in 1991. This politically motivated commitment to curbing free speech continues: Last week, shortly after Twitter was purchased by Elon Musk (the left's favorite bogeyman du jour), Greenblatt issued a call to companies to suspend all advertising on the social network. The list goes on.

This rank partisanship is understandable: Impactful leaders make political calculations, and even if they err too enthusiastically on one side or another they may be forgiven for playing hardball to promote their organization's end. But the organization's end itself has changed under Greenblatt in ways that make the old ADL unrecognizable. Before Greenblatt's arrival, for example, the ADL defined racism as "the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, [and] that a person's social and moral traits are predetermined by his or her inborn biological characteristics."

That perfectly sound definition was too much for Greenblatt's ADL, and so, in 2020, the organization changed its tune to define racism as "the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people"—a definition they needed to change yet again in the wake of Whoopi Goldberg's 2022 comment that the Holocaust wasn't "about race."

Scroll on to the ADL's homepage these days and you'll be treated to a love letter to critical race theory, defined merely as a noble tool that "helps us understand how and why racial injustice continues to persist in the U.S." Parents who object to CRT being taught in their children's schools, another page cannily suggests, are borderline domestic terrorists or, at the very least, in the sway of white extremist groups.

Besides, sayeth the ADL, have no fear: "there is no evidence that critical race theory is being taught in K-12 schools." You know, besides the Critical Race Theory Coalition Summit hosted by the Portland Public School District. Or the Loudon County Public School District's

partnership with a group called The Equity Collaborative to train teachers in CRT. Or the California Department of Education endorsing a CRT-based ethnic studies curriculum despite more than 100,000 objections.

And what of the Jews? In the wake of some complaining that the group founded in 1913 to protect one of America's most threatened minorities from prejudice and violence seems much less focused on Jews these days, a senior ADL staffer in charge of Jewish outreach tweeted: "One of these days we need to talk about how the Jewish community's reactions to antisemitism coming from Black people is inherently tied to (implicitly racist) fears of Black violence."

The possibility that "the Jewish community's reactions to antisemitism coming from Black people" might be tied to attacks like this one, or this one, or this one, or this one, or this one, or many more like them, was obviously out of bounds. Which was actually of a piece with the ADL's new recommendation for how Jews globally should react when violence is done to us: "Jews," tweeted the same senior staffer, "\*have\* to be ok with Palestinians \*explaining\* why some turn to terrorism." In case you're scratching your head here, let me simplify: The ADL believes that whenever Jews get violently stabbed, shot, blown up, or beaten, our first reaction must be to search our souls for what we must've done to deserve it.

Sure, Greenblatt and the gang occasionally murmur some correct condemnation of some real hater, but no one in their right mind can inspect his tenure and deny that he has hollowed out the ADL of any and all connection to its original mandate, instead using its clout to turn it into an effective and stealthy progressive, partisan operation. And this actually puts real Jews in danger, because anyone can now claim that talk of antisemitism on the rise is merely political propaganda. Bad vibes, as the kids say.

Let's zoom out for a minute and try to understand how we got here.

In 2015, Jonathan Greenblatt was named head of the Anti-Defamation League. Until that point, the

organization had been run for nearly three decades by Abe Foxman, a Holocaust survivor who had spent the war hiding with his Catholic nanny. Foxman joined the ADL as a young man and rose through its ranks before taking over as director in 1987. He earned his reputation as a serious moral authority who was unafraid to take unpopular positions.

Most importantly, however, Foxman kept the organization's focus precisely where it had to be: on its 26 regional chapters staffed by hard-working and dedicated men and women who both diligently collected data about antisemitism on a granular and local level—reporting their findings to law enforcement and keeping Jews safe—and forged meaningful ties with other communities, investing in the education needed to make sure future generations wouldn't be inflamed with antisemitism's feverish appeal.

Eight years later, the organization is nearly unrecognizable.

Lots of current ADL critics like to focus on the fact that Greenblatt was a veteran of the Obama political machine. But the rest of his resume may offer even more insight into his views.

In 2002, Greenblatt and his business school roommate founded Ethos Water, a premium bottled water social enterprise later acquired by Starbucks; he also founded All for Good, a volunteerism platform supported by "a coalition of leading companies, non-profits, and government agencies"; was an operating partner at Satori Capital, a private equity firm focused on conscious capitalism (much better than the unconscious kind!); and CEO of GOOD Worldwide LLC, which, among other things, published a broadsheet distributed exclusively at Starbucks. These broadsheets, Greenblatt claimed, were not intended to convince anyone "to vote Democratic or Republican," insisting his product was ideologically neutral. But the first issue kicked things off with a little lecture on ... carbon emissions.

What Greenblatt was an expert in wasn't antisemitism or bigotry; his real skill—the one every single line on his resume speaks to—was knowing how to launder the expansion of obscene

corporate power via costumes of righteousness. This made him a perfect fit for the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, a creation of the Obama administration basically designed to allow the White House to quarterback the donations to, and the investments of, a wide swath of America's enormous nonprofit sector. Rather than having NGOs operate distinctly, the apparent idea was for the administration to issue marching orders, set agendas, and apply enough pressure for corporations and the donor class to follow suit. If you want to see this synergy of corporate America, social causes, and the Democrat Party in action, just look at the Black Lives Matter movement, which has, to date, raised \$49.5 billion in pledged corporate dollars without delivering anything by way of transparency or accountability.

A similar strategy has also done well for the ADL. The organization is now a big business: Its revenue for 2020, the most recent year for which data is available, was \$91,313,791—almost double that from the year Greenblatt took over. And while the organization does not disclose the identity of its donors, it did recently reveal that these now include Apple, Uber, MGM Resorts, and other behemoths. With these revenue streams rushing forth merrily, it's unlikely that anyone, from within the organization or without, would succeed in changing course and restoring this organization to its foundational mission.

The logic here is that the ADL is 10 times more powerful as part of the Democratic Party coalition than outside it. A more powerful ADL gains Jews a proverbial seat at the table, while at the same time augmenting the ADL's bank account with contributions from party donors and large corporations—which, in turn, makes the ADL an even more powerful advocate. In return for permission to hold the Jewish card, the ADL agrees to play that card on behalf of the party. A little circular, but it works for everyone involved.

Everyone, that is, except actual Jews. Jewish interests are abandoned in exchange for permission to run a protection racket. When your *raison d'être* is being the go-to guy for blessing or denouncing

misbehaving celebrities—depending, of course, on where they fall on the political spectrum and how “contrite” they’re willing to be in public—you can’t actually protect the dentist in Cleveland who wonders why his kid in college just had her mezuzah ripped off her doorpost or the Hasidic kids in Brooklyn now regularly getting their heads bashed in.

To understand why, think, for a moment, about Kyrie Irving. What would the head of a serious version of the ADL have done? It’s actually pretty simple. First call attention to how messed up this situation is, not by issuing pompous statements with corporate logos slapped all over but by doing exactly what a bunch of Jewish kids did at a Brooklyn Nets home game earlier this month: wearing a T-shirt that says “Stop Anti-Semitism” in the front row of the stadium. Those kids probably invested a few hundred bucks, and in return received news coverage all over the world, appearing not as shadowy peddlers of indulgences but as what Jews actually are: outsiders getting pummeled left and right by bigots and haters.

Then, this ADL chief would go on TV and instead of cozying up to Sharpton, America’s greatest living pogromist, simply deliver the following speech: “I feel bad for Kyrie. I admire what seems like his willingness to seek out knowledge and to stand alone for what he thinks is true. But for all his alleged seeking, he still can’t find the right answer. He’s making the same mistake that millions have

made throughout history—being smart and curious enough to wonder how the world works, but only finding imaginary Jews at the end of every road. This is the road to ignorance and misery, not to knowledge.”

Except, of course, that you can’t give that speech if your current or hoped-for donors are made up of the real thing Kyrie would uncover if he looked a bit more carefully: the very large corporations who have melded with government to create an almost impregnable, opaque, all-containing blob that controls American life, from dictating public health priorities to changing the way we produce and consume food.

Instead, all you can do is shame people who are confused and undereducated using the brute force you have at your disposal: corporate power. Cancel their contracts! Nix their ad campaigns! Make them bleed cash! Which, as we all saw this week, only amplifies the original noxious allegation.

This is why having no ADL would be so much better than having the one we currently have. Because of its own massive conflicts of interests, the ADL under Greenblatt may very well be, inadvertently or otherwise, contributing to the growth of antisemitism, not its diminishment.

This is as much of a philosophical question as it is a practical one. If your goal is to exterminate antisemitism—make the world’s most ancient

and persistent hatred disappear, vanish, go kaput—then what we’ve seen from Greenblatt this week is understandable: Let’s educate or punish one hater at a time, until they’ve all reformed or disappeared. But if you believe, like me, that antisemitism will never go away, this approach is nothing more than a silly game of whack-a-mole. If we believe antisemitism is here to stay (and if you doubt it, do I have a few really good history books for you), then what you need is a real defense organization—one that doesn’t waste time with selling indulgences but instead forms bonds with groups and communities across the American spectrum, remains very vigilant to every attack no matter the perpetrator’s identity, and provides real education in large part by, ya know, speaking the truth clearly and unequivocally.

Here, then, is my solution to the problem that is Jonathan Greenblatt’s ADL: Let’s accept that the ADL is no longer a Jewish organization and ask for a divorce. Greenblatt can keep everything: His anti-racism, AstroTurf organization and all the corporate money trees he shakes on its behalf. We *amcha* Jews walk away with nothing—nothing, that is, but our dignity and our safety, both improved by no longer being pawns in a profit game that is endangering us more by the day. ■

*This article was originally published on November 7, 2022.*

## STONE COLD TRUTH

## Tablet

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

# The Vanishing

The erasure of Jews from American life

BY JACOB SAVAGE

**S**uddenly, everywhere you look, the Jews are disappearing.

You feel it like a slow moving pressure system, an anxiety of exclusion and downward mobility. Maybe you first noticed it at your workplace. Or maybe it hit when you or your children applied to college or graduate school. It could have been something as simple as opening up the Netflix splash page. It's gauche to count but you can't help yourself: In academia, Hollywood, Washington, even in New York City—anywhere American Jews once made their mark—our influence is in steep decline.

For many Jews, the first instinct is to look inward: We blame intermarriage, assimilation, the loss of the immigrant work ethic. This is, of course, a cope. Because the most significant cause of the decline isn't Jews themselves, but that American liberalism, our civic religion, has turned on us. Where Jewish success was once upheld as a sign of America's strength and progress over its prejudices, Jewish "overrepresentation" is again something to be solved, not celebrated.

A tenure-track humanities professor at a prestigious public university tells of the finalists for her department's next graduate school cohort. Of the 20 or so candidates, four to five are Jews. One is a working-class yeshivish applicant with an incredible backstory and even better recommendations. He is passed over for not being "diverse" enough. Of course our professor doesn't complain—her own tenure is at risk. In the end, not a single Jew is offered admission.

Another Jewish professor applies to work in the UC system. In his mandatory diversity statement, which he describes as "the most shameful piece of writing I've ever done," his sole aim is

to convey the impression that he hopes to be the last Jewish man they ever hire. He still doesn't get the job.

And why would he? Using YouGov data, Eric Kaufmann finds that just 4% of elite American academics under 30 are Jewish (compared to 21% of boomers). The steep decline of Jewish editors at the *Harvard Law Review* (down roughly 50% in less than 10 years) could be the subject of its own law review article.

The same pattern holds across America's elite institutions: a slow-moving downward trend from the 1990s to the mid-2010s—likely due to all sorts of normal sociological factors—and then a purge so sweeping and dramatic you almost wonder who sent out the secret memo.

Museum boards now diversify by getting Jews to resign. A well-respected Jewish curator at the Guggenheim is purged after she puts on a Basquiat show. At the Art Institute of Chicago, even the nice Jewish lady volunteers are terminated for having the wrong ethnic background. There's an entire cottage industry of summer programs and fellowships and postdocs that are now off-limits to Jews.

In 2014 there were 16-20 Jewish artists featured at the Whitney Biennial. After a very public campaign against a Jewish board member with ties to the Israeli defense establishment, the curators got the message. The 2022 biennial featured just 1-2 Jews.

Comb through the dozens of Jewish names for the 2012 Guggenheim Fellowship (I count 30-40). You'll have a much harder time finding them 10 years later (14-16).

From 2010 through 2019 there were at least three Jews in every MacArthur Fellowship class, sometimes as

many as five or six. *The Forward* would write effusive columns celebrating the year's Jewish geniuses. Since 2020, just 0-1 Jews a year have been awarded grants. *The Forward* hasn't bothered to take note.

Today American Jews watch with Solomonic bemusement as *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* is argued before the Supreme Court. On some level we sympathize with the Asian American plaintiffs, who are suing Harvard for using admissions criteria that discriminate against them on the basis of their race. Maybe they really are the new Jews, facing the same barriers—insidious racism, personality scores, rural geographic preferences—that we once did.

On the other hand, fancying ourselves to be high caste members of a beneficent elite, we pretend not to notice that "diversity, equity, and inclusion" is a cudgel used to exclude certain groups of Americans, including Asians and Jews. Desperate to maintain their waning status within the liberal coalition, Jewish communal organizations ignore these contradictions. Once a protector of specifically Jewish interests but now secure in its new role as handmaiden to power, the Anti-Defamation League filed an amicus brief—in support of Harvard.

In the 1940s, the ADL took a different tack. For decades unofficial quotas at most Ivy League universities limited Jews to around 10% of the student body, despite evermore qualified Jewish applicants. Jewish organizations made it their mission to break this invisible barrier and by the end of the 1950s the quotas were a dead letter. The long summer of American Jewish success had begun.

But the seasons always change. A FIRE/Yougov survey found that self-identified Jews now number just 7% of Ivy League students, compared to 10% during the height of the antisemitic quotas.

In his gripping podcast *Gatecrashers*, about the history of Jews in the Ivy League, Mark Oppenheimer describes the troubled state of Jewish campus life. Harvard has gone from being 25% Jewish in the 1990s and 2000s to under 10% today. "In theory it could be the case that Jews are the same percentage of whites at Harvard as they always were," he

explains. “But Harvard has not shrunk the number of athletes it admits [...] and they’ve kept their geographical diversity. So if you’re a Jewish kid who’s not an athlete and not a legacy and not from Wyoming ... then there’s not much room left for you.”

According to the Hillel College Guide, Penn’s Jewish population declined from 26% in 2015 to 17% in 2021; NYU’s dropped from 24% to 13%. Princeton, Columbia, and Cornell have seen smaller but significant declines (Brown and Dartmouth, with different institutional priorities, are by all accounts happy exceptions).

Data from the Yale Chaplain’s Office—which appears to be the only Ivy League university that still tracks religious affiliation—shows a similar trend: The Jewish population went from 19.9% in the 2000s to 16.4% in the 2010s. A couple of years ago, the school’s chaplain told Meir Chaim Posner, the Chabad rabbi at Yale, that around 11% of Yale undergraduates were Jewish. “It’s dropped slightly since then,” Rabbi Posner told me in November.

“The university has decided that DEI is the overarching principle of admissions,” one Hillel director told me. “There’s a general consensus that it’s more difficult for Jewish students to get into top tier schools.” Nor is this difficulty confined to secular Jews—the modern Orthodox population has also crashed. A college counselor at a top Jewish day school reports that as universities have revamped enrollment and gone test-optional, the number of Orthodox students has decreased. “Every year has been harder,” he said. “Our ability to thoughtfully predict the likelihood of admission has gone way down.”

An uneasy *omertà* settles in. The Ivies skip college nights at Jewish day schools they visited for decades. At Penn there used to be two daily minyans—now there’s one. There are hushed whispers that if current trends hold, some of these colleges might no longer be able to support an Orthodox community at all.

The 1999 Hillel College Guide now reads like a map to a lost civilization. Harvard and Yale have 1,500 Jewish undergrads apiece. There are 5,000 Jewish

## “The 1999 Hillel College Guide now reads like a map to a lost civilization.”

students and grad students at Columbia, 6,000 at Penn, 14,000 at NYU. It’s hard to imagine that as recently as 2008, articles were being written about the “race” to attract Jewish students.

What was normal less than two decades ago sounds like a siren call from a distant golden age. To even suggest that a 15%-20% Jewish undergraduate student body might be acceptable in a country in which Jews make up 2.4% of the total population is anathema in today’s liberal society.

In New York—the seat of American Jewish political power—there are almost no Jews left in power. A decade ago the city had five Jewish congressmen, a Jewish mayor, two Jewish borough presidents, and 14 Jewish City Council members. Today just two congressmen and a single borough president remain. Only six Jews now sit on the 51-person City Council. Shelly Silver, the corrupt Orthodox former State Assembly leader, was replaced by Yuh-Line Niou, a pro-BDS “progressive” whose oligarch father was featured in the Panama Papers. Not even the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is recognizably Jewish anymore.

“What you have is a lack of identity of Jews as Jews,” the Democratic political consultant Hank Sheinkopf told

*The Washington Post*. “And they don’t have the power to ensure that there’s more than one Jewish congressman. It’s astounding.”

Younger Jews are being excluded from the liberal organizations their parents and grandparents helped create. Identitarian meltdowns roil the progressive world. The Women’s March, the ACLU, and the SPLC all get rid of Jewish leadership. There will be no more “Mighty Iras” in our lifetime. Not even the Jewish president of the Audubon Society is safe.

There are still powerful Jews in Washington—neo-Nazis on Twitter like to post photos of Biden’s cabinet—but the influence is waning. Is it a coincidence that in the U.S. Senate (a handsy group of old men if ever there was one) the only senator forced to resign during the #MeToo panic happened to be Jewish? Or that activists pushed for Dianne Feinstein’s resignation for the explicit reason that she be replaced by someone who isn’t Jewish?

Of the 114 federal judges appointed by Joe Biden (as of this writing), just 8-9 appear to be Jewish—in a field that’s historically been at least 20% Jewish. Liberals worship Ruth Bader Ginsburg as a magical Jewish Teletubby, but they wouldn’t dare nominate another “white woman” to the highest court anytime soon. We are back to the single Jewish seat on the court.

Apparently Jews have so much power and influence that the highest-ranking Jewish senator in history finds it too politically difficult to hire a 22-year-old version of himself. There were at least 15 Jews on Chuck Schumer’s staff of 64 in 2014. After facing pressure for not being diverse enough, and despite an enlarged staff of 89, he can no longer make a minyan.

In Los Angeles—America’s second most Jewish city—there are now just two Jewish City Council members, down from six in 2000. In last year’s infamous dustup, Nury Martinez, the sharp-tongued council president, had despicable things to say about Black people, Oaxacans, even Armenians—but Jews were barely a footnote. “Judíos cut their deal with South LA,” she said. “They are gonna screw everybody else.”



Speaking of LA, a decade ago there were 22 Jews on *The Hollywood Reporter's* annual list of the Top 50 Showrunners. In 2022, that's down to 13. Other than the half-Jewish (and already famous) Maggie Gyllenhaal, you'd have to go back six years to find a single Jew on *Variety's* annual list of 10 Directors to Watch.

Thanks to the odious new Hollywood house style that requires a detailed ethnic and racial classification at the top of all capsule biographies, we can see just how many self-identified Jews are in the Sundance writers and directors labs, or the NBC, Paramount, and Disney writers and apprenticeship programs—it is zero. It seems not being Jewish is actually a primary qualification. So much for Jewish control of Hollywood.

The decline is so rapid—and the golden age so close to living memory—it's a running joke. On the latest season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David meets with a group of younger non-Jewish studio executives to convince them to cast a Mexican American girl as Young Larry's Jewish love interest. On *Reboot*, Steve Levitan's Hulu show, an old guard of Jewish sitcom writers clash uncomfortably with their younger and woker—and noticeably non-Jewish—colleagues.

Not even Hollywood's Jewish history belongs to Jews anymore. The new Academy Museum, dedicated to "radical inclusivity" and paid for with Haim Saban's Jewish money, couldn't bring itself to include Hollywood's Jewish founders. In *Babylon*, Damian Chazelle's epic flop about Hollywood's golden age, the director follows an ahistorical Mexican studio executive and an Asian American lesbian rather than any of the very real Jewish moguls or screenwriters or directors of the era. What's telling isn't that Chazelle ignored Jews (anyone can do that) but that not a single reviewer bothered to notice this "erasure." The culture has moved on.

What remains of Jewish Hollywood lives on borrowed time. Spielberg can make his *Fabelmans*, James Gray his *Armageddon Time*, but only because these are nostalgia pieces. Soon there

will be no more RBG's, no more Spielbergs, just a few off-brand Seinfelds doing a heritage act. There will certainly never be another Larry King or Andy Borowitz, Jews of such astounding mediocrity you wonder what was in the water.

In the 1950s, after Stalin's death, after the purges, the Politburo turned to another pressing issue: the overrepresentation of Jews in Soviet life. Proportional representation (3% Tajik! 2% Uzbek! 12% Ukrainian!) became official policy, and the next decade saw the quick erosion of the Jewish nomenklatura. Soviet Jews—who had disproportionately contributed to and benefited from the building of the communist state—had outlived their usefulness.

A 1964 *New York Times* article explained that because Soviet republics assigned a certain number of students "preferential admission" based on their nationalities, other nationalities—aka Jews—were excluded. "A higher percentage of Jewish students was permitted to attend universities in Czarist Russia than is enrolled in the USSR today," an outraged American Jewish Congress declared. "The 8.2% of university graduates who are Jews contrasts sharply with the present Jewish university enrollment of 3.22%."

As true believers in the postwar liberal project, American Jews spent decades advocating for tolerance and equality of opportunity, not least because we were the prime beneficiaries. The ADL didn't fight the quotas in the 1950s so Jews could matriculate in proportion to their percentage of the population. But there's a tension between meritocracy and representation. The new DEI regime treats any disparity between groups as evidence of unfair advantage—and yet we're supposed to think it's a coincidence that Jewish representation plummets at the exact moment America frantically pushes to racially rebalance all high-status industries.

Because what is framed as a backlash against America's "white" centers of power is in many cases a clever sleight of hand. Jews are being disproportionately purged from liberal institutions

because Jews disproportionately exist within those institutions.

When activists and journalists and executives talk about how Broadway or NPR or publishing is "too white," what they really mean is "too Jewish." When *The New York Times* says it wants to make its internal demographics look more like New York City's (excepting the Hasidim, of course), what this means is "fewer Jews." Twenty years ago, if Pat Robertson spoke along these lines—making the same complaints about the same people and industries and institutions—there would have been a rush to condemn it as antisemitic. Today it passes for social justice.

In the 1960s and '70s, facing hard barriers to their professional advancement, Soviet Jews lost the faith. The children and the grandchildren of the revolution tried to emigrate. When the authorities wouldn't let them, American Jews rallied to their cause, created brand-new communal organizations, petitioned Congress, rallied thousands-strong outside the United Nations. Ours was a community confident in its power and confident in its future.

Asian Americans have the dignity of looking at admissions practices and demanding fair representation. The Jews, as ever, are a people apart. From civil rights to Vietnam to the spectacular bounty of their cultural and political achievements, liberal Jewish boomers always managed to be on the right side of history. It is a supreme irony that they've helped empower a movement that now places their children and grandchildren on the wrong side.

If Putin or Orban reduced their universities' Jewish populations by 50%, the ADL would be howling. But Harvard and Yale can magically lose nearly half their Jewish students in less than a decade and we'll take it on the chin. That this is occurring with the full acquiescence of a terrified liberal Jewish establishment should tell you just how much power Jews in America still have.

A previous version of this article mistakenly asserted that there were no Jewish Marshall Scholars in 2022. ■

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