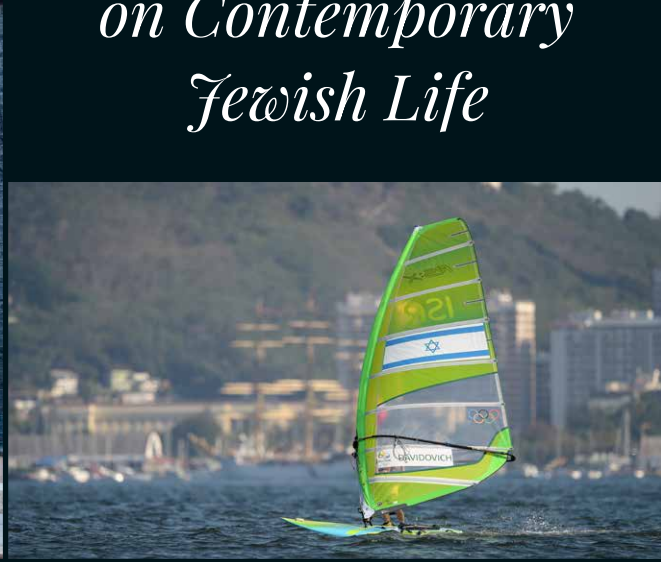

**The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry**  
 The Lester and Sally Entin  
 Faculty of Humanities  
 Tel Aviv University

# Perspectives

## 2023–2025

*Thoughts  
on Contemporary  
Jewish Life*







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Vol. 2





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**The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University** supports research on Jewish history, culture, and politics. It publishes the flagship annual Antisemitism Worldwide Report in cooperation with the Irwin Cotler Institute for Democracy, Human Rights and Justice, and the annual For a Righteous Cause Report. Every year, the Center organizes three seminars on Jewish affairs that are open to the public and publishes eight issues of Perspectives – analytic essays on contemporary Jewish life and thought.

You are welcome to visit our website: <https://cst.tau.ac.il>

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# Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	5
<b>They Who Betrayed Ukraine</b>   Uriya Shavit	7
<b>Seeking Justice</b>   Maia Bornsztein	13
<b>Indians, The New Jews</b>   Carl Yonker	17
<b>It Doesn't Mean Anything</b>   Uriya Shavit	21
<b>Herzl's Trees</b>   Jakob Brandstätter	25
<b>The Labour and the Jews</b>   Noah Abrahams	29
<b>Mysterious Ways</b>   Uriya Shavit	33
<b>Leaving the BBC</b>   Noah Abrahams	37
<b>Identity at the Bar</b>   Fridolin Sablatnig	41
<b>Midsummer Darkness</b>   Peter Lebenswerd	43
<b>Learning Nothing from History</b>   Uriya Shavit	49
<b>Head Held High</b>   Aleksandra Gliszczynska-Grabias	51
<b>Boycott Harvard</b>   Uriya Shavit and Carl Yonker	55
<b>The Witness</b>   Uriya Shavit	59
<b>Notes from Bucharest</b>   Uriya Shavit	61
<b>Past Present</b>   Carl Yonker	65
<b>The Shiites Who Love You</b>   Rafael Nabizade	67
<b>Notes from the Emirates</b>   Uriya Shavit	69
<b>Word on the Contributors</b>	73



# Foreword

Every year, the Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes eight issues of Perspectives, articles featuring ethnographies, commentary, and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. We are pleased to share with you this compilation of eighteen issues published between 2023 and 2025.





# They Who Betrayed Ukraine

## *American Jews, Israel, and the Presidential Election*

October 2024

Uriya Shavit

There's a funny thing about the 2024 American presidential election. It serves as a perfect example of how a flow of reliable information is sometimes more confusing than meaningful. The more polling data showered on experts – I suspect that come November 6, many will need rehab from four hours of daily injections – the less a sound projection of the results is possible.

Harris leads in the national polls, but some of her margins are smaller than the gap between Biden's polling numbers and his actual result four years ago. The battleground states are all within the margin of error in all polls. Voters trust Trump more on the economy, which is what they care about most, but they also think Harris is more connected to people like them, and will do a better job on health care and housing affordability. Harris lost some black voters but gained some anti-Trump Republicans. Thousands of hours of analysis conclude with the bottom line that Harris is most likely to win. Or Trump.

Distrusting polls has become a conventional wisdom, but even in 2016, the majority did a good job, within their stated methodological limitations. Because election campaigns in America are often about telling people whatever they want to hear as long as it can ring credible, the advancement of the science of polling leads to more competitive campaigns, ironically making the job of pollsters more difficult.

There are five possible scenarios for how this election will end, some more disturbing than others, but none entirely reassuring about the future of democracy in America, or the endurance of the Union itself.

One likely scenario is that Harris wins the Electoral College, but does so narrowly enough for the sour losers from 2020 to try and hinder the peaceful transfer of power once again, only this time not just violently but also with greater legal sophistication and with the help of a politicized and partially corrupt Supreme Court. Whether they succeed or not, the United States will see restless times.

Another likely scenario is for Harris to win the popular vote but lose the Electoral College. Since 1992, Republicans have won the popular vote only once, but have won the Electoral College three times, so a repeat of this scenario will not be an abnormality.

There is a huge difference between a second Trump presidency and a first Harris presidency: He will have, in all likelihood, the Congress and the Supreme Court at his side; she will have to chart her way through negotiations and compromises. If they lose because of the distortion that is the Electoral College for the third time within 24 years, Democrats will grudgingly accept the twisted reality of having a national majority yet being powerless. But for how long?

Then there are the possibilities, well within the margins of error, that Trump will end up commanding a comfortable electoral and national win, or that Harris would. Neither will change a sad reality: Trump is a vulgar convicted felon who incited an insurrection and openly entertains racist tropes

and displays despotic instincts, and he earned the solid support of at least 45% of the American public not despite of who he is, but because of who he is.

No matter who wins, the crisis in America will not just go away, no more than the social media that inflames it would. It is beyond me why students of history do not recognize that the very existence of the Union is at risk.

In understanding what got Americans to their current dangerous abyss, attention should be drawn to a blind spot called religion.

The majority of political scientists and media analysts are secular people, which possibly explains why they overlook the role of devotion in these (and other) elections. Religious affiliations are as significant a force in American politics as race, gender, and education. In fact, they are arguably the most significant force.

Trump's hopes to win are entirely dependent on the support of devout, white, evangelical Christians. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2020, 71% of non-Hispanic white Americans who attend Church at least once a month voted for Trump over Biden, compared to 46% who attend Church only a few times a year. Among white evangelical Christians who attend Church at least once a month, 85% voted for Trump in 2020. In 2024, Trump is expected to gain 82% of that crucial electorate.

The enthused support of the more socially conservative and religiously practicing Americans for a man who epitomizes sin seems puzzling. Yet, it is actually not hard to explain.

It thrives on the self-congratulatory concept of the mysterious ways through which God works and the satisfaction of being reassured that vice is the way of the world. It also thrives on the expanding chasm between how non-religious and religious Americans see the world and the pleasure the religious take in seeing how terrifying Trump is for the non-religious, who are usually very confident. It is encouraged by the political interests of religious communities, which are inseparable from their social and cultural needs. The evangelical Christian who attends Church every week lives in a different habitus than the one who goes there only on Christmas, even if they both define themselves as evangelical.

The same pattern applies to American Jews. The more religious they are, the more pro-Trump they are. The ultra-Orthodox share Trump's cultural instincts and some of the interests of his evangelical base, especially in securing autonomy and state funding for private religious education.

Yet most American Jews are not ultra-Orthodox. They have for over a century aligned with the Democratic Party – although to varying degrees.

According to data from the Jewish Virtual Library, Wilson received just 55% of their support in 1916, while Roosevelt received 90% in 1940. Johnson got 90% in 1964, while Carter got just 45% in 1980 (still a plurality of votes in that three-man race). Obama had 78% in his first run, and only 69% in his second.

Jews became overwhelmingly Democrats as part of the coalition of minorities created by Roosevelt in the 1930s. That historical link alone would not have guaranteed their continued allegiance – just look at the electoral map of the southern states in 1976 and you'll get the picture.

For American Jews who cherish being fully integrated Americans, the Republican Party and its evangelical base, which includes a fair share of Christian nationalists, risk the foundations of their identity. They fear ideologists who insist that Christianity should be given primacy over other religions, and who seek to impose their norms on the public at large. Those Jews are Democrats

not because of Israel and not because of their parents, but because they are secular and because of their children.

Trump got 24% of the Jewish vote in 2016. In 2020, polling showed he got as much as 31%, although other polls suggested he got as little as 21%. There is no indication he will significantly outperform his previous achievements this time around.

I actually don't consider Trump's anger with Jewish voters for not supporting him in larger numbers despite his steadfast support for Israel as antisemitism. If we accept that Israel is important to most American Jews because they are Jewish, then criticizing them for not rewarding pro-Israel views makes sense.

It is, however, far from obvious that Trump is indeed the better candidate for Israel – even if we put aside the concerns for the future of American democracy and of the Union under a second Trump presidency.

Trump's Middle Eastern policies got right a few crucial basics, which the Democrats have failed – and continue to fail – to grasp. He understood that the Arab side would never see the United States as an impartial arbiter, so standing firmly with Israel helps, rather than injures, diplomatic efforts. He understood how despotic regimes and anti-Western terrorist groups cynically take advantage of human rights discourses. He also understood that there is little point in advancing for the 137th time the exact same kind of two-state-solution negotiations and hoping for different results.

These premises facilitated the morally just decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, which, contrary to what many pundits predicted, did not drive the region to catastrophe. They also facilitated the Abraham Accords, which broke the Palestinian monopoly over normalization and signaled to them that the passing of time does not work in their favor.

What the Trump strategy – actually, the Jared Kushner strategy – lacked was some kind of plan as to what to do if things go wrong; in case a full-scale war with Hamas or Hizballah erupts, or in case the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank collapses, or all of the above. He had no idea back then, and his confused statements indicate that he and his advisors do not have a clear strategy now, just as the Democrats don't have one.

It is far from guaranteed that Trump will be willing to pay the price that supporting Israel will require in the next few years, and – unlike in the case of a Harris victory – there will be no one to stand in his way if he chooses to impose on Israel whatever unfavorable conditions he would want to impose.

The Abraham Accords were a lucrative business for all involved, including the United States. The current situation is very different. To do the right thing for Israel and for the region is going to be tremendously costly for the United States. Financially, militarily, diplomatically. It will, at some point, involve angering not just Arab allies but also some Jewish supporters.

Czechoslovakia – sorry, Ukraine – is a warning light.

At this very moment, there are hundreds of thousands of young Europeans and Americans who owe the civilian clothes they are wearing to the sheer courage and sacrifice of the Ukrainian people.

Putin's aggression against Ukraine was never about NATO membership.

The Russian dictator has cultivated three fascist tropes – of a Russian *volk*, Russian exceptionalism, and Russian destiny of greatness. Ukraine stood in his way, injured his petty pride and lunatic dreams, and seemed like easy prey. He assaulted it twice: When it terminated its subordination to

Moscow (in 2014) and in 2022, as a consequence of its election of a President who was everything he was not: popular, young, liberal, and passionate about serving his people.

If we read what Putin and his fellow war criminals actually said before the war began, rather than what we'd like to believe they said, we'll recognize what the true Hitlerian ambitions of the Russian regime were: a swift conquest of Ukraine, leading to the breakdown of NATO, de-facto subordination of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states to Russian interests and whims, the reunification of the Russian *volk*, and the reemergence of a bipolar world order, divided between declining liberals and megalomaniac fascists.

Putin and Hamas are birds of a feather: cruel, malicious, and keep punching above their weight. No wonder they flock together.

Ukraine shocked Russia, and the liberal world, by frustrating Putin's plan. A three-day victory march turned into a three-year grueling war.

Yet the West was quick to show how undutiful it can be. We have had the dormant Marxists who were just waiting for the right moment. The closeted fascists who secretly or openly admire Putin. The lazy, uninspiring mainstreams who did not rise to the gravity of the hour.

And then there was Trump.

Instead of demanding Biden's administration give Ukraine more, much more, as a true American patriot and committed democrat would, Trump consistently bolstered Russia's ambitions. First, by leading the efforts to block aid for Ukraine in Congress, which gravely impeded the situation of the Ukrainian troops. Then, by publicly implying that if elected, he would impose on Ukraine Putin's terms for so-called peace.

This is like reliving the 1930s, only with Roosevelt replaced by Charles Lindbergh.

The financial burden of helping Ukraine survive against a superior force has been heavy, especially (and, unjustly so) on the United States. Yet the alternative is so apocalyptic that the burden is the lesser evil by far. Western military and financial aid cannot deliver for Ukraine the absolute victory it desires – but it can stop Russia from winning a war that will end all peace.

Trump's approach to Ukraine has been so insane and bizarre that it almost begs some Manchurian-candidate-like conspiracy theories. Still, I have two more probable explanations.

One is that people tend to dislike most those who remind them of their own personal flaws. Zelenskyy is, like Trump, a television celebrity who became a national leader – only, his leadership style ascended with the role, whereas Trump remained a rating-thirsty celeb in new clothes.

Another is that Trump owes his popularity in part to the strong isolationist impulse that developed in the United States following the disaster in Iraq (he and Obama have only two things in common: their election was highly improbable, and they opposed the war).

The isolationist instinct has existed in America throughout the 20th century, and during the Second World War, it was frighteningly strong. But it has always been defeated a moment before it was too late. Its triumph at this historical juncture could lead humanity to a very dark hour, Israel included.

Yes – the case of Israel and Trump is different than that of Ukraine and Trump. Out there will be the affectionate family circles and friends, the influential donors, the evangelicals. All of them may wish to see less American involvement in world affairs, but their commitment to Israel is passionate and firm.

Yet all also proved, again and again, that they don't have the guts to oppose Trump when he stands his ground. Lindsay Graham, for example, is a real hawk when it comes to Russia as much as he is a sincere lover of Zion. Did that do Ukraine any good on the Senate floor?

The only meaningful guarantee against the temptation of isolationism is an inner moral compass that allows a president to distinguish right from wrong and recognize that some rights are worthy of a selfless fight. I trust Trump and his anti-Ukraine surrogates with securing the future of Israel and the Jewish people as much as I would trust Joseph Kennedy.



# Seeking Justice

## *Thirty years after the bloodiest terror attack, Argentinian Jews still demand answers*

August 2024

**Maia Bornshtein**

I was born four years after the AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina) terrorist attack in Buenos Aires in 1994. Every July 18, we remember the victims and demand truth and justice based on collective memory.

In Argentina, the Jewish community is united; we celebrate our differences and naturally integrate into the broader social mosaic of the country.

As a teenager, I attended the annual youth memorial held every July 17 at night, where songs and artistic performances renew calls for justice and pass the responsibility for seeking it to future generations.

One of my most vivid memories is from January 2015, when Alberto Nisman, a federal prosecutor, was preparing to present evidence about the AMIA bombing before the Argentinian Congress.

Everyone was filled with expectation and hope that this could finally bring us closer to the truth.

On January 18, Nisman was found dead in his apartment. He was assassinated.

I felt powerless, disappointed, and enraged; that's how injustice makes me feel.

That day, I and many others joined demonstrations around the city – protesting against injustice, against Nisman's killing, and against any ties with Iran.

At the AMIA memorial ceremony following Nisman's murder, the anger of the people was palpable and easy to feel. Their screams, whistles, and tears left no doubt. We had once again been let down as a society, left without justice.

Silence was not an option. Since then, the demand for justice has only grown stronger every year.

For Argentinian Jews, it feels as if the tragedy happened yesterday.

On July 18, 1994, at 9:53 am, a van filled with explosives impacted the front of the AMIA building at Pasteur 633, Buenos Aires. Eighty-five people were killed, and 300 people injured.

It was and still is the bloodiest terrorist attack in the history of Argentina and the Latin American Jewish communities to date.

Just two years earlier, on March 17, 1992, another terrorist attack struck Argentinian society. That time against the Israeli Embassy, leaving 29 dead and 242 injured.

The story of Marcelo Alguea, the brother of Silvana Alguea De Rodríguez, one of the AMIA bombing victims, is just one of many.



His sister Silvana worked in the AMIA building. She went to pick up Marcelo. That day, she was covering for a colleague on leave, and Marcelo had to go to work.

They first stopped to take Marcelo's niece to her first day at daycare; she was only nine months old.

When Silvana left Marcelo, they said goodbye quickly and casually with the certainty that they would see each other again some hours later. Silvana continued to her office in the AMIA building.

At 9:55 am, Marcelo received a call from his father wondering if Silvana was at work.

There had been an explosion at the AMIA building.

The first hospital near AMIA, Hospital de Clínicas, was chaotic. People were confused; there were many ambulances and police. Something was terribly wrong.

When Marcelo arrived at the site of the AMIA building, the smell of ammonia was unbearable. There was an enormous mountain of rubble, and people were climbing on it, trying to help, trying to understand, desperately looking for their loved ones.

Silvana's name was not on the list of the deceased or the list of the survivors.

Over the next six agonizing days until her body was found, the family was desperate. They could see her among the people in the street, but Silvana was not there. And she never will be.

This year's memorial was the 30th anniversary. Thirty years of calls for justice have only resulted in disappointment and impunity.

The international media coverage and the foreign presence in the memorial were massive, but there was almost no variation between this year's local media coverage and previous years.

The speech delivered by AMIA's president, Amos Linetzky, was filled with strength and hope for a different future.

The recently elected President of Argentina, Javier Milei, was present. The mayor of Buenos Aires directed all police cars and fire trucks to sound their sirens at 9:53 am to ensure everyone remembered the tragedy at the AMIA building.

The uniqueness of this year's memorial was the testimonies of the families of the victims.

They expressed their pain, this time declaring terrorism to be the enemy of Argentinian society as a whole, regardless of creed or religion.

There is no political rift that can divert the attention from the real enemy.

In the years that followed the terrorist attack, there have been investigations that indicated that Hizballah and Iran were responsible.

Despite having the information and Interpol's Red Alerts, no one has been arrested, imprisoned, or convicted.

Trials have been held. Investigations have taken place.

The first trial failed due to corruption and power struggles between politicians and judicial personnel, tainting the pursuit of justice with irregularities, deviations, and challenges.

On the 25th anniversary of the AMIA bombing in 2019, Argentina designated Hizballah as a terrorist organization. It stated that Hizballah continued to represent a threat to national security and the integrity of the countries in the region.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

Following Argentina's lead, several other countries, including Colombia, Paraguay, Honduras, and Guatemala, also adopted the same designation of Hizballah.

Yet, Hizballah is still active and growing in the region, especially in the Tri-Border area, Bolivia, and Venezuela, carrying out activities related to recruitment, money laundering, drug trafficking, and closely related to organized crime.

In April 2024, the Argentinian Federal Criminal Court of Appeals declared Iran as the intellectual author of the worst terrorist attack in the country's history and Hizballah as the perpetrator.

It was a symbolic judgment, absent a judicial sentence or punishment of those involved.

The Jewish people have much experience building a collective memory and preserving the story of our ancestors, passing down the concept from Deuteronomy 16:20 of "Tsedek, Tsedek Tirdof" (Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue). It is our mantra and mandate from generation to generation.

Every July 18 at 9:53 am, Argentinian society gathers to uphold the truth, show no tolerance for impunity, and affirm their knowledge of those responsible for the attack, even without a formal judgment.

The call for justice is renewed alongside a living memory, this time led by a new generation committed to the values of peace and freedom, full of strength, knowledge, and determination to pursue justice.



# Indians, The New Jews

## *Jews have never made it to the very top in the US and the UK. Why do Indians?*

July 2024

**Carl Yonker**

The late Joe Lieberman was the first American Jew to have run on the national ticket of a major political party.

In 2000, he was Al Gore's vice presidential candidate. They won the popular vote by more than half a million ballots. They would have also won the electoral vote had the Supreme Court allowed Florida's ballots to be properly counted.

Lieberman died last March. One of the last interviews he gave in his life was with our Center. He spoke passionately against a second Trump term and expressed grave concerns about the rise of antisemitism in America. He related that, at the time, he interpreted the 2000 election results as proof that being Jewish no longer prevented politicians from rising all the way to the top, but that he was no longer confident that was the case in today's America.

Out of context, Lieberman added: "There have been prolific attacks on Asian people for no reason other than that they were identified as Asian by their faces. And yeah, look, the Asians are the new Jews. If you go to college graduations in America today – I went to my granddaughters' last year at Emory, there are more Kims than Cohens graduating. And I suppose that could arouse jealousy, too, but we should stand with them as they stand with us."

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2021, there were approximately 4.2 million Indian Americans, making up about 1.3% of the total US population. This is double the number of Indian Americans than in 2000. In contrast, the Jewish population of the United States as of 2021 was estimated to be 7.5 million, making up 2.4% of the total population.

Lieberman did not live to see the dramatic development of the 2024 presidential race. If she beats Trump, Vice President Kamala Harris, the daughter of a university professor who migrated to America from India and a black father, will become not only the first woman and first woman of color but also the first person of Indian descent to hold that office. As the presumptive nominee, her running mate may be the Jewish governor from Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro.

Among those who challenged Trump for the Republican nomination were two Indian Americans – former UN Ambassador and South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and business entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

The wife of Trump's vice-presidential nominee J.D. Vance, Ushu, is an Indian American and practicing Hindu.

A decade ago, there was only one Indian American member of the House of Representatives and less than ten serving in state legislatures, while none had served in the Senate or run for president, although former Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal sought the Republican nomination in 2016. Now, there are five Indian Americans in Congress, and more than 40 serve in state legislatures.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

Jews, who comprise less than 3% of the electorate in America, constitute 6.2% of the members of Congress. The Jewish imprint in American politics, as well as in science, technology, art, media, and economics, has been enormous and is likely to remain so in the next decades.

The rise of Harris and other politicians of Indian descent suggests that, for the first time, Jews have a serious contender for the title of the most integrated and influential minority group in America.

The United Kingdom is an even more glaring example.

According to the UK's 2021 census, there were approximately 1.4 million people of Indian descent in the UK, making up about 2.5% of the population, compared to 287,360 Jews, or 0.5% of the total population.

Rishi Sunak, whose parents migrated to the Kingdom from India, was one of the youngest British prime ministers. His spell in power was short, but few analysts will argue that the crushing defeat of the conservatives was his doing. His Indian descent did not impede his rise, and played no role in his fall.

The 2024 elections saw a record 26 Indian-origin MPs elected to the House of Commons, reflecting the community's growing political engagement and influence, up from 15 in the previous government (8 from Labour and 7 Conservatives). The three main political parties fielded more Indian-origin candidates than before as well.

Thirteen Jewish MPs (12 Labour, 1 Conservative) were elected in 2024. Five Jewish Conservatives lost or did not run to retain their seats. Given that the Indian electorate is five times larger than the Jewish one, Jewish representation in parliament is still higher. Yet despite their long roots in Britain and many achievements, no Jew has ever been elected prime minister in Britain. Disraeli, born to a Jewish family, was converted to Anglicanism by his father at the age of 12.

Why are people of Indian extraction doing all of a sudden so well in American and British politics alike?

One reason is that their relative strengths resemble those of the Jewish minorities in the two countries. First and foremost, putting education first.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2021, 43% of Indian Americans held a post-graduate degree compared to 21% nationally. Consequently, Indian Americans have the highest median household income among ethnic groups in the US. In the UK, too, people of Indian extraction score high on income and education.

Indians, like the emancipated, enlightened segment of the Jewish population, have demonstrated a remarkable ability and desire to integrate into the majority societies without challenging their norms and practices, while at the same time shone as innovators and entrepreneurs.

Yet there are also core differences between Indians and Jews in the US and the UK. These provide possible explanations why Indians, who are more recent newcomers, have climbed all the way to the top, while Jews, whose roots are deeper, have not.

[that, other than sheer luck, as both Sunak and Harris are to an extent children of circumstance – Sunak, of the Truss fiasco, and Harris, of Biden's poor health].

Indians in the US and the UK, unlike Jews, are seen as a minority of color. Yet, because of their impressive achievements relative to other minorities of color, they reassure the majorities that their societies are not structurally biased and that all minorities have a fair chance to succeed.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

Thus, they allow voters to champion – or convince themselves that they are championing – the causes of equality and diversity without putting in doubt the foundations of their societies at large.

Indians in America and the United Kingdom, unlike Jews, are an ethnic minority but not a religious minority. A majority are Hindu, but a minority are Christians of different denominations.

The election of Jews to the highest posts releases the demons of antisemitism and, as such, forces even the societies that have been friendliest to deal with uneasy chapters from their pasts and reflect on the endurance and intensification of Jew-hatred in the present.

Finally, while Jews lean heavily to one side of the political map in both the United States (Democrats) and the UK (Labour), people of Indian extraction are almost evenly split politically in the two countries, meaning that they have a shot in different political climates and cycles.

Does any of this actually matter?

To a point. An American Jewish President or Vice President, or a British Jewish Prime Minister, would be a symbolic milestone. Yet in the United States, as in the United Kingdom, the most vital thing for Jews is for democracy and civil liberties to prevail.

Which is why a Harris victory is what most American Jews will yearn for and vote for.

Her husband, who celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at Temple Shalom in Aberdeen Township, New Jersey, already promised to place a Mezuzah on the doors of the White House if the first First Gentleman ever will happen to be a Jewish First Gentleman.





# **It Doesn't Mean Anything**

## *Olympic Reflections, from Max Nordau to Artem Dolgopyat*

July 2024  
**Uriya Shavit**

A quick trivia question for hot summer days: which country ended No. 2 in the medal table of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, just behind the Soviet Union?

You know it is not the United States, or I would not have asked.

The answer is East Germany. Otherwise known as the German Democratic Republic.

Five of the top 10 nations in those Olympics were East European Communist states.

Back then, the sensational East German achievement served as supporting evidence for the common perception that in the DDR, Communism was doing better than in any other country of the Warsaw Pact and will survive longer.

In less than two years, East Germany ceased to exist. It turned out that its Olympic achievements were based in part on a huge drug doping industry. As with many other features of Communism (and as is the case in today's Russia), its sporting culture was based on deception.

There is a simple rule about the correlation between doing well in sports and doing well as a nation: it does not exist.

Sports are associated with discipline, hard work, team spirit, and the realization of ambitious objectives, so it is tempting to analyze the character of societies and the direction of nations based on the trophies their athletes collect.

Which does not mean it is a meaningful method.

The United States has been the Olympics' No. 1 country for over three decades. It is a nation obsessed with professional sports. It nurtures physical education as a primary aspect of elementary, junior, and high school life.

The bottom line: A society whose national cohesion is shattered, with declining life expectancies and epidemics of obesity and depression.

There was a time around fifteen years ago when Spain won the world championship in almost every popular sport there is. A remarkable achievement for a country its size. That was also the time of the Great Spanish Depression, which brought the local economy to the verge of collapse.

Last August, Alfred Drexler, a commentator for the mass-circulation German tabloid *Bild*, lamented the decline of Germany on the international sporting stage.

His column, entitled "The German Shame," and supported by a damning table of recent failures, blamed the decline on parents who spoil their kids by picking them up from school with their cars

instead of encouraging them to walk home, as well as allowing them to spend all their days with their smartphones instead of playing outside.

Two weeks later, Germany won the basketball world championship for the first time.

Which brings me to the Jewish people and their state.

I still remember the day Israel won its first Olympic medal. Silver, in Judo. Yael Arad. Barcelona 1992. There was a true sense of jubilation in the country, although few people, including myself, cared about judo or understood why Arad made it to the final and not her opponent.

Finally, a medal!

It was front-page news not only in the Israeli media but also in the New York Times.

The reason for the fuss was that Israelis had been frustrated for years with their terrible international sports record.

Wellington said – well, actually, he probably didn't – that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. No one argued that the Six Day War or the Yom Kippur War were won on any kind of playing field.

Israeli teams and athletes excelled in the 1950s and the 1960s in the Asian Games and other Asian competitions. But the quality was only third- or second-tier on the international scale.

As compensation, Israel ranked No. 1 in the world in the authoring of penny books for young readers, in which its footballers were described as the best. The protagonists had the tremendous ability to score goals shortly after they exhausted their rivals on the field with passionate Zionist speeches.

In the late 1970s, when Israel was kicked out of Asian competitions for political reasons, it did well in one sport: European basketball. Yet that was, to an extent, an illusion: It benefited for a time from American *olim*, naturalization laws that gave Israeli teams and its national team an unfair edge, and the limited interest in this sport in Europe.

The majority of the 1980s were largely arid sports-wise with the Olympics shining as the once-in-four-years embarrassing manifestation that Israel lags behind other developed nations in sports. This happened at a time when Israelis could already watch (on very special occasions) international sports live on television.

The frustration was fed by the misconception that winning medals does the image of a nation good. That is, of course, nonsense; no one became fonder of the USSR because of its achievements in sports. So many medals are awarded anyway that to get noticed (other than in the NYT) you need to either win a lot, or have once-in-a-generation sports hero. A Nobel Prize winner in chemistry is worth 100 gold medalists not just in terms of service to humanity, but also in terms of public relations.

But failing in sports hurt the Zionist ethos of normalcy, of being a nation like all other nations.

Max Nordau's desire to see a new type of Jew, one who cultivates physical and mental strength, articulated at the time the Olympics were just revived, was actualized in the IDF, in the Kibbutzim and Moshavim, and elsewhere, but not in sports, and Israelis wondered why.

While Yael Arad's medal opened the door for others, medals remained rare.

Then, three decades later, in Tokyo 2020, taking place in 2021, Israel won a record four medals, including two gold, including for the first time one in one of the three most important Olympic sports.

Its athletes demonstrated what can be achieved through hard work, modesty, and team effort.

So?

The Tokyo achievements were no reflection of the direction of the country. If anything, they were a precursor to what has been arguably the most catastrophic time in Israeli history.

Gold medalist Artem Dolgopyat did not become a national icon and role model. He had nothing to offer but professionalism, dedication, attention to detail, and shyness.

The difficulties faced in his personal life were another painful reminder that Israel had yet to determine its identity.

It is hard not to be sour about the Olympics.

A celebration of human fraternity stained forever in Berlin 1936, where the Games served to sport-wash Nazism; that more than once helped all kinds of despots hold their heads high; that went on almost business as usual after the Palestinian terror attack of Munich 1972.

A celebration of human excellence in which many excellent athletes cannot participate because of caps on representation per nation.

A celebration of technological progression, which too often encouraged cities to make grand investments in the wrong places at the expense of their citizens.

A celebration of human diversity, in which certain negligent sports are arbitrarily included, while other, more popular, are not.

A celebration of love for sports epitomizing the basic immorality of present-day sports: too much money is involved, sending the wrong message about what should matter most in society.

Add one more problem:

A competition between nations that risks leading to wrong conclusions about their actual state of affairs.

There is every chance that Paris 2024 will be the best Olympics for Israel ever.

I wish Israeli athletes win big time, return with a record number of medals, and have Hatikvah played again, and again, and again in French stadiums, to the dismay of Israel-haters.

I fear this will send the wrong message to a nation in deep need of soul-searching and a restart.



# Herzl's Trees

## *A journey in Vienna on the 120th anniversary of the great visionary's death*

July 2024

**Jakob Brandstätter**

One hundred and twenty years ago today, on July 3, 1904, Theodor Herzl died. He was just 44.

The death of the founder of the World Zionist Organization, who, within seven years of activism, transformed Zionism into a viable dream, sent shock waves and caused grief across the Jewish world.

It was a catalyst for the second wave of migration that brought to the Land of Israel several of the founding fathers and mothers of the future state.

More than 6,000 people attended the funeral in Vienna, ending at the Döbling Cemetery.

Stephan Zweig wrote: "For suddenly, at every railway station in the city, with every train, day and night, people came from all realms and countries, western, eastern, Russian, Turkish Jews, from all provinces and small towns, they suddenly rushed in, the shock of the news still in their faces; never did one feel more clearly what earlier the arguing and talking had made invisible, that it was the leader of a great movement who was being carried to his grave here."

It was a turning point, argued Zweig. One that came too late: "At once Vienna realized that it was not only a writer or mediocre poet who had died here, but one of those shapers of ideas that rise victoriously in a country, in a people, only at immense intervals. A tumult arose at the cemetery; too many suddenly flocked to his coffin, weeping, howling, screaming in a wildly exploding despair; it became a roar, almost a rage; all order was shattered by a kind of elemental and ecstatic grief such as I have never seen before or since at a funeral."

I am on my way to the square the city of Vienna named after Herzl.

As I walk by my former high school, Akademisches Gymnasium Wien, on Lothringerstraße, I observe the memorial to the victims of the Shoah created by Karl Prantl, the Austrian sculptor.

Three granite slabs, originating from the "Great Street" of the National Socialist Party Rally Grounds, are embedded in the pavement. They were originally created using forced labor.

As a high school student, I passed by here every day for eight years. Although they are a part of the sidewalk, it never felt right walking on them directly.

The history of Jewish life in Vienna is marked by exclusion, assimilation, and incomprehensible suffering, but also by great achievements in literature, philosophy, and science.

No era reflected this reality more than the transition from the 19th to the 20th century.

Economic, scientific, and cultural prosperity was largely led by the intellectual elites of Jewish Vienna. The plays of Arthur Schnitzler, the novels of Zweig, the pioneering psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. And Herzl, the journalist, the playwright. He made Vienna his home after his parents moved there from Pest when he was 18. At the time, he was fully immersed in German culture.

Jews identified with the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire and German cultural values. The joke had it that they were the only true Austro-Hungarians. However, the more Jews excelled and shined, the more antisemitism reared its ugly head in political forms.

Every Viennese who wanders through his or her city is constantly confronted with the deep scars and bright spots of the city's past.

While reminiscing about my high school days, I stop by one of the many commemorative plaques attached to the school building.

It is in memory of the former student Hans Kelsen, the Jewish jurist who wrote the Austrian constitution of 1920, which is still in effect in amended form today.

Kelsen was in the same class with Ludwig von Mises, who later became one of the most important representatives of the Austrian School of Economics.

Von Mises was born into a wealthy Jewish family. His great-grandfather was elevated to hereditary nobility by Emperor Franz Josef I. Deeply attached to his country, he served as an officer in World War I and was decorated several times.

Even after the collapse of the empire, von Mises served Austria in an exemplary manner and, as an economist, was largely responsible for ending hyperinflation. Like some other Austrian Jewish intellectuals, he emigrated to the USA, a minute before it was too late.

I wrestle with the bizarre and sad irony of radical nationalist movements choosing to weaken their own nation by either killing or expelling their own intellectual elite in pursuit of mystical nationhood and racial fanaticism.

Lost in thought, I find myself on Ringstraße, the historic boulevard that belts around the city's historic center.

I walk past Stadtpark, the centrally located beautiful park through which the Vienna River runs, and cross to the other side of Ringstraße. I end up on Stubenring, where the Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Platz is located.

The square next to Ringstraße was named after Karl Lueger, Vienna's mayor and founder of the Christian Social Party (predecessor organization of the Austrian People's Party).

Lueger used vicious antisemitic rhetoric during his campaigns and terms in office in the late 19th century and until his death in 1910.

I stop in front of the Karl Lueger monument and examine it closely.

The monument, and the debate on how to treat Lueger's antisemitic legacy, has been a pervasive topic in Vienna's political and social circles for decades.

In 2009, the University of Applied Arts organized an art competition to redesign the monument.

Klemens Wihlidal won with his creative proposal to tilt the monument 3.5 degrees to the right. The structural implementation is now scheduled to start this year.

In 2016, the City of Vienna added an additional plaque to the memorial. The text on the plaque, written by historian Oliver Rathkolb in collaboration with the Cultural Commission of the First District, attempts to offer a differentiated and contextual classification of Lueger.

The plaque describes the mayor's contributions to the city of Vienna, but also his antisemitic and nationalist rhetoric and legacy.

For some, this was not enough, and they demanded the removal of the monument.

In 2020, activists graffitied the monument with paint and the word "Schande" (shame).

I take a few steps closer and contemplate. Yes, the shameful past must not be forgotten and must be reappraised, but this will not be achieved through graffiti or the removal of monuments.

Canceling would also cancel the opportunity to critically examine the city's problematic history. Graffiti does not do justice to a complicated issue. This is better achieved through comprehensive historical contextualization and representation through art.

I think about the words of the Dutch historian Maria Grever, who argued in the context of the broader discussions about monument removal: "Destroying statues is no medicine against racism. We need these traces of the past, even if these are hard to stomach."

As people walk by, it occurs to me that this place symbolizes the torn duality of Vienna's soul.

The success of Lueger's antisemitic rhetoric not only influenced the Nazis, but also inspired political Zionism. In addition to the antisemitic hostility Herzl experienced in his academic fraternity Albia and the Dreyfus affair, Lueger's antisemitic rhetoric and political success also had a significant influence on his abandonment of assimilation and his becoming a committed Zionist.

I reckon I have had enough Lueger for one day and leave him buried in thought.

After only two minutes of walking, I find myself on Theodor-Herzl-Platz.

In 2004, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Herzl's death, the city of Vienna decided to ceremoniously rename the Gartenbaupromenade to Theodor-Herzl-Platz.

Another location had already been planned for Theodor-Herzl-Platz. However, at the suggestion of the daily newspaper "Die Presse," then still called the "Die Neue Freie Presse," the city, together with the Jewish Community of Vienna, decided to choose a location with a deeper connection to Herzl.

Next door, in the office wing of the Marriott Hotel, "Die Neue Freie Presse" had its headquarters at the time.

At a young age, Herzl was already one of the newspaper's most prominent authors and editors. It was his reputation as a journalist that made the publication of *Der Judenstaat* publicly noticed and debated, launching a journey that ended so quickly.

After being diagnosed with a heart condition, Herzl died in a sanatorium in Edlach an der Rax.

He did not see the completion of his life work, but his courage remained steadfast to the end.

His Anglican clergyman and supporter, William Hechler, visited him in his last hours and relayed his parting words: "They are splendid, good people, my fellow countrymen! You will see, they are moving into their homeland!"

And they did.

Reminiscing about the funeral, Zweig concluded: "In this immense grief, which surged up from the depths of a whole nation of millions, I was able to realize for the first time how much passion and hope this single and lonely man had thrown into the world through the power of his thought."



## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

In August 1949, Herzl's coffin was brought to Jerusalem. One-quarter of the Jewish population of the young state of the Jews that had just ended its war of independence participated in the funeral.

Herzl planted trees whose shadow he never enjoyed. But millions of his admirers did. I sit down on a bench at the square, smiling slightly while enjoying the sun. Joy and sadness lie close together, in Vienna as in Jerusalem.

# The Labour and the Jews

## *Antisemitism is no longer tolerated. But ahead of Starmer's landslide, can Jews feel safe?*

June 2024

Noah Abrahams

On July 4, the United Kingdom will head to the polls after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called an early election.

Sunak is the fifth Conservative prime minister since 2010. The Labour, led by Sir Keir Starmer, a former Director of Public Prosecutions, is projected to win 42% of the votes. Through the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post system, this achievement will provide a landslide, possibly the biggest in British history.

In recent years, Starmer, whose wife is Jewish, worked hard to perish antisemitism and antisemites from his party. He had the Labour adopt the IHRA definition, made clear that antisemites would be thrown out, and often acted accordingly.

His predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, a staunch critic of Israel fond of anti-Western, anti-liberal terror groups, associated with pro-Palestinian social media pages that contained antisemitic rhetoric.

Corbyn was suspended from the Labour in 2020 following his dismissive response to the findings of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) that the party discriminated against Jews and did not counter antisemitism as effectively as it could have.

Starmer was brutal in his reaction to Corbyn's denialism. He said those who believed the issue of antisemitism in the party had been "exaggerated" were also "part of the problem and should be nowhere near the Labour party."

Hundreds of other members were banned from the party for alleged antisemitism.

In 2023, Starmer described antisemitism as "an evil" and stated that "no political party that cultivates it deserves to hold power." He added, "I said from the start that we would be judged not on our own terms but by the return of those who felt they could no longer support us."

Jewish Labour Movement national chair Mike Katz told *The Jerusalem Post* that under Starmer's leadership, UK Jews are willing to give the Labour party another chance.

Indeed, Starmer is expected to win the majority of Jewish votes.

It is difficult to assess how much Jew-hatred contributed to Corbyn's defeat in 2019. After all, Corbyn did win 32% of the votes to the Tories' 43%, which, in a different electoral system, the Labour would not have crashed so badly. At the time, Brits wanted to get the matter of Brexit over and done with.

Nevertheless, the bottom line is that Labour was defeated under Corbyn, the hater, and under Starmer, who fights antisemitism, they are headed to their biggest victory ever.

This is a lesson also seen in other European countries.

Antisemitism, and other forms of racism, can make you popular on certain campuses. But it won't deliver power.

Still, the prime minister-to-be's commitment to the fight against Jew-haters has not been unblemished.

In 2019, Starmer threw his unwavering support behind then-party leader Corbyn, the same Corbyn who was eventually banished on the grounds of antisemitism.

During the recent campaign, Starmer was reluctant to discuss that decision. He exclaimed that his predecessor would have been a "better prime minister" than Boris Johnson.

"Everybody knew there was always going to be a day after when we would have the opportunity for a new party and to make sure our party was there to face the future," he said.

Contemporary antisemitism among Labour ranks raged already before Corbyn ascended.

In 2003, Labour MP Tam Dalyell said there was "far too much Jewish influence in the US" and that "a cabal of Jewish advisers" were directing American and British policy on Iraq.

Two years later, Labour politician Ken Livingstone (who went on to become the Mayor of London) asked Jewish journalist Oliver Finegold if he had been "a German war criminal."

When the reporter said he was Jewish, Livingstone said he was "just like a concentration camp guard."

"You are just doing it because you are paid to," he sniggered.

If some among Britain's Jews are still suspicious of Starmer and the Labour, it is because, just like the football team the Labour leader roots for, Arsenal, he at times flakes when under pressure.

Starmer has not been consistently determined in purging the party from Corbyn-echoes. Diane Abbott, the first black woman and longest-serving black MP, who still remains close to Corbyn and who was once his shadow home secretary, was suspended by the party for her questioning of whether Jews, as well as other minority groups, face racism in Britain.

However, ultimately, in May, responding to the row in the party over the move, Starmer had a change of heart and allowed Abbott to stand as a candidate.

Flip-flopping has been particularly evident when it comes to Israel, whose existence is delegitimized by not a few Labour activists and MPs.

In the aftermath of the October 7 atrocity, Starmer rigorously supported Israel. Speaking at an event in November, he said he did not back a ceasefire because Hamas did not want one, and it would only embolden the terrorist group.

Starmer boldly explained that a ceasefire "would leave Hamas with the infrastructure and the capabilities to carry out the sort of attack we saw on October 7."

In treacherous and testing times, Starmer put his neck on the line for Israel.

Fifty-six Labour MPs wasted no time voting for a ceasefire in Gaza in the immediate aftermath of October 7. Starmer did not.

But fast-forward to February, when as many as 100 of his Labour MPs, including at least two members of his shadow cabinet, were willing to rebel and vote again for an immediate ceasefire.

Facing pressure, Starmer changed his stance to calling for "a ceasefire that lasts."

"This is what must happen now. The fighting must stop now," he told delegates.

Conservative MP Steve Double, a member of the Friends of Israel parliamentary group, argues that “despite whatever Keir Starmer may claim, it would appear many in the Labour party still have a blind spot when it comes to Israel’s legitimate right to defend itself and its existence as a sovereign state.”

“I was appalled at the rhetoric from many members of the opposite benches,” Double said.

Last November, Labour MP Andy McDonald chanted the phrase “from the River to the Sea” in central London.

In February, it was revealed that a Labour candidate in a by-election, Azhar Ali, told a meeting of activists that Israel deliberately allowed the October 7 attacks to take place in order to give itself the “green light” to invade Gaza.

That same month, Graham Jones, a former Labour MP for Hyndburn in Lancashire, was suspended after he argued that British subjects who fight in the IDF “should be locked up.” The suspension was lifted in May.

Harsh criticism of Israel is not necessarily antisemitism. Yet when the right of the one Jewish state to exist or defend itself is questioned, Jews in Britain fear their existence is questioned, too.

According to a Savanta survey from February, 41% of the British public believe that Labour still has an antisemitism problem.

These are the highest figures for any of the major parties in the UK.

Among Labour voters, one-third shared that view. Soon in Number 10 Downing Street, it will be for Starmer to prove them wrong, and he will have the confident majority to do so without fearing political backlash.



## **Mysterious Ways**

*Tell me who intercepted the Iranian missiles, and I'll tell you what kind of Jew you are*

April 2024

**Uriya Shavit**

My newsagent – yes, some people cannot give up on print – is an elderly Haredi man and one of the most pleasant persons I know.

The day after Iran's intercepted aggression against Israel, he told me with a beaming face that even non-religious Jews who entered his store that morning admitted Tehran's fiasco must have been the result of divine intervention.

The headlines of Haredi newspapers offered a similar take on that night's drama. They spoke of a miracle, of God's blessings and mercy. Not a word about the pilots who risked their lives. Not a word about science and technology. Not a word about the UK and the USA.

More Hebrew-language Haredi daily newspapers are published today in Israel than mainstream ones. If only Ben-Yehuda were here to see.

In *Hamevaser*, which represents the small Hasidic courts, a front-page column noted that there was simply no natural way for 300 different types of missiles to be almost totally intercepted without even one Jew killed, while at the same time unintentionally killing three Jordanians along with one Bedouin girl.

Congratulations, Jacob Lustigman. You have just won the award for the most insensitive, silly, morally inexcusable, and anti-Jewish comment of the year.

Wait, there is more.

Commenting on what he described as the cheeky decision of the Supreme Court to stop funding Yeshiva students who avoid being recruited, Lustigman argued that a country that decides it does not need a spiritual Iron Dome ends up paying more for physical Iron Domes. He added that following October 7, only idiots would rely on the IDF; rather, any logical person understands that only God can save us.

I am not sure Lustigman has a good explanation for why God did not just stop the missiles before they were fired or why the miracle of bringing down the Iranian regime was not performed. I guess the answer is that God works in mysterious ways. Heads, I win. Tails, you lose.

I wonder what Haredi responses would be if someone dared explain the Meron disaster as a divine punishment for not studying math and engineering. Furious, no doubt, and rightly so.

What we have here is a one-sided relationship, where only one community is allowed to articulate the most outrageous ideas.

Prayers are personal. It is not for human beings to know if they are answered.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

There is childishness and megalomania in attempting to figure out what God wants and does, especially when it serves petty sectarian interests. In my view, it borders on blasphemy.

The debate is not, as often described, between religious and secularist Jews. It is between medieval Jews and modern Jews.

Modern Jews are faithful, or not; practicing, or not. What they share is a deep historical understanding that Jews should not be passive, introverted, and ignorant. That whatever their personal beliefs are, they must embrace modernity. Empiricism. Rationality. Innovations.

That there is a world out there.

Modern Jews contributed to science and technology more than any other group in history.

Modern Jews have made Israel a military power that ensures there will not be a second Holocaust.

Modern Jews made Iran's ambitions a colossal fiasco.

If current demographic trends continue, and if Haredi society will not profoundly change – there is not one serious evidence that it is changing – then within less than two generations, the ultra-Orthodox will become the majority group in Israel.

The economy will break down because a minority, no matter how hardworking and highly educated it is, cannot provide for an ever-growing group of poorly educated people who are funded mainly by the state or work in low-paying jobs that do not require advanced skills. The military will disintegrate because the few will not forever agree to risk their lives, while a growing group of dodgers degrades their sacrifice as secondary in importance.

Houston, we have a problem.

The minister of education, Yoav Kisch, must know all this. Yet this morally boneless opportunist has used his tenure to privilege Haredi education instead of forcing it to reform radically.

Putting the Haredi narratives aside, this has actually been a good week.

Many will disagree on this, but I think the first direct Iranian attack was a great Israeli – and Western, at large – strategic triumph with far-reaching implications.

It demonstrated to the entire world how dangerous and daring Iran is. Europeans are now more likely to do the math and realize the existential threat Iran poses to them. This realization will boost Israel's international standing.

It showed the limitedness of Iran's military strength compared to that of its enemies, who have not fully shown theirs, yet.

It exposed Iran, for the first time, without the shield of the proxies through which it has been menacing for years, and, in doing so, proved one more time that in the Muslim world, talk of unity and solidarity is just talk, and each regime cares only about itself.

It proved that an Israeli-Sunni alliance is workable, at least against the great Shiite devil.

It positively projected on Israel as a start-up nation, a status that has been undermined.

It manifested that in 21st-century modern warfare, being on the offense is much more difficult than being on the defense. It is a lesson fascist Russia already learned in Ukraine, and, sadly, Ukraine learned in parts of its legitimate counter-offensive. Perhaps war-mongering dictators around the world were watching.



## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

I would like to think that the night of interceptions also reminded Israelis about the importance of their universities and schools. That their fate can only be as promising as their scientific training.

Reading Haredi newspapers, I am not so sure.

The great Herzl wrote in *Der Judenstaat*, explaining why the State of the Jews must not become a theocracy, that faith unites us, while science makes us free.

Herzl was twice wrong.

Faith does not unite us. For centuries, it has been a source of division.

And science does not make us free. Rather, freedom allows us to make good science, and good science protects our existence.

If we forget this, Heaven help us.



# Leaving the BBC

## *A young Jewish journalist gave up his dream for principles. What happened next?*

April 2024

**Noah Abrahams**

“The only Jew in Derby” is what my friends called me during my time at university in England’s East Midlands.

It was a nickname I cherished, and I continue to cherish.

Some might perceive this as a cruel or discriminative label. However, I was always proud to be who I am. A British Jew with a passion and desire to represent my people in a place where so few others share my identity.

British Jewry accounts for 0.46% of the UK population. Now, in a climate so toxic, my friends think more carefully before bellowing my nickname across a bar or football field.

Whilst I feel like I shout from the rooftops with my message of peace and truth, I sense fear from my peers. A trepidation that they could somehow put me in harm’s way if they somehow gave the game away.

Some of my earliest memories stem from attending a non-Jewish elementary school on the outskirts of London and taking the day off for Rosh Hashanah whilst the other children stayed put in the classroom. I have often felt the outcast.

My passion for Zionism and, indeed, Judaism, stems from being an ambassador for our “ethnic minority” at an early age. All of those Hanukkahs when everyone else waited eagerly for Christmas, I knew that these people called the Maccabees had fought off the hate and pathed a way for celebration. It was always abundantly clear that as a member of the 0.46%, life would be different.

But, as with life’s twists and turns, the pride for religion comes in ebbs and flows. In fact, I hated leaving my non-Jewish elementary school to join a Jewish high school. The indoctrination I felt as we davened Shacharit or sat through Mincha, only learning about Judaism in religious studies and religious terms, stirred up an anger.

I left high school at 16 and studied at a community sixth form college instead. After five years of sheltered and privileged Jewish life in an affluent and protected bubble, I stepped back into the real world and studied journalism in a secular school.

Life as a lonely Jewish boy among hundreds of Christians, Catholics, Muslims, Sikhs, and atheists was back on. My duty as a Jewish diplomat and advocate had been re-activated.

Whilst studying between ages 16 and 18, I remember my first battle against the authorities as my lecturer told me to shift my focus on a mandatory essay assignment anywhere but the Holocaust on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. My stomach turned, my guard went up, and I instinctively defended my right to educate on history’s cruelest chapter.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

Today, I often think back to that exchange. A Jewish student banned from mentioning the Holocaust because Jews “wallow in self-pity.” As a then 16-year-old Masorti Jew, I tasted the struggle of an antisemitic narrative.

Six months on from October 7 and the worst antisemitism experienced in my lifetime, I reflect on the “part I played.” When working in the media, one is often told of the reasons behind a righteous act. Equally, one is frequently presented with an excuse as to why wrongdoing is continued.

On October 12, 2023, I made a decision that pointed my career in a different direction. Forget about being “the only Jew in Derby.” I became the “Jewish sports reporter who quit the BBC.” A decision with ramifications that frequently surprise me.

Sitting on the Tube last month, I opened the Daily Mail, and right there in black and white, Sir Michael Ellis summarized my story in a nutshell. In a national newspaper, readers were reminded that activism comes only with a personal price paid.

Sir Michael, the former Attorney General for England and Wales, explained that “Jewish sports journalist Noah Abrahams, 22, quit his dream job after the Corporation’s refusal to unequivocally call Hamas what it is: a terrorist organization. Noah said that ‘words have the power to fuel hate and put fuel on the fire. Words impact how we think, how we react, how we act. They have influence.’ The BBC’s senior management has fundamentally failed to deal with this problem and uphold its own guidelines. Awful though it is, it cannot be denied – the BBC seems to be institutionally anti-Semitic.”

Sir Michael’s piece and my resignation may feel like a harsh assessment of a treasured British icon. However, this is a broadcaster that, to my knowledge, banned Jewish employees from attending marches against antisemitism, reported Hamas executions based on Hamas statements, and relied on Hamas-supporting journalists to verify reports.

In journalism and as a member of society, one is rarely called upon to really and truly reflect on who they are and what they believe in.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s cynical and highly unpleasant character, Mr. Hyde, will often show his face in life. On Saturday afternoons, the Saturdays of fever pitch, whilst now working as a television producer in a hot, stuffy, and stale studio, I feel Hyde’s presence. He attacks any positive mindset and spreads his poison. He whispers, “What if?”

The fact is that I had the option to stay quiet, keep a blossoming career, and fuel my passion whilst being paid.

However, I now see that sacrifice can be a blessing. With every Hyde, there is a Dr. Jekyll. The doctor reminds me that in sacrificing a job I treasured, I inspired others to speak louder and stand by their own beliefs with confidence and conviction.

I have just concluded a one-week visit to Tel Aviv and Israel at large. Everywhere I went, people who heard my story or already knew about it told me how much it meant to them. How important it is for the Jews of Israel to know that Jews living in other countries stand with them.

I was fortunate enough to join rural farming communities near Netanya. Alongside hundreds all over the country, I contributed in fundraising for the war effort and in keeping local business alive.

For hours, volunteers from the UK, US, Canada, and Australia struggled under sweltering heat for a cause thousands of miles away from their homes. A group of strangers became friends. We picked strawberries and shared our Jewish experiences.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

Working in a remote field, miles from any town or city, we bonded over our common values and came together as a people. Sacrifice has several faces, and each is a test of character, resilience, and strength.

Whether coined the “only Jew in Derby” or ‘the Jewish sports reporter who quit the BBC,’ these past six months have taught me that labels matter little. It is the morals behind any headline or description that have the most meaningful impact.



# Identity at the Bar

## *Takes from a German–Israeli workshop on the thriving of hate in contemporary politics*

March 2024

**Fridolin Sablatnig**

The cast: An Israeli political scientist, a 29-year-old German PhD in Philosophy, and two 18-year-old Austrians working at memorial museums in Riga.

The location: A sticky table at a sports bar in southern Dresden, Germany, filled with card-playing locals. In the background, on television, Eintracht Frankfurt playing Union Saint-Gilloise.

The scene: Late February. Rather cold, no rain. Three half-empty Feldschlößchen Pils (a local beer), the remnant of a Sprite, and the last piece of garlic bread.

The odd-looking group is talking about the connection between hate and identity.

Before ending up in the sports bar, the four of us visited one of the darkest places of German history: The memorial site at the former concentration camp Buchenwald, where the Nazis imprisoned and killed Jews, political enemies, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, and others who were deemed unworthy in the Nazi “utopia.”

Besides learning about the horrible conditions, the history, and the atrocities that took place in the camp, we learned about a topical controversy. Officials of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany) party are excluded from memorial events at the site because of disgraceful comments about Holocaust remembrance culture in Germany members of the party made and the anti-democratic and hate-focused campaigns the party leads.

The AfD is currently leading the polls by more than ten percent in the upcoming elections in the federal states of Thuringia and Saxony (to be held September 1). Ideological equivalents employ similar strategies of spreading hate in several other European countries, including Austria, and are doing equally well.

It is not easy to answer why such populist parties are on the rise recently, but it is vital for us to make the effort if we wish for liberalism to survive.

The group with which I visited Buchenwald took part in a workshop organized by the Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University, the Technical University Dresden, and the German-Israeli Foundation. It brought together 18 young German and Israeli scientists from diverse disciplines to share perspectives on hate. The three-day program consisted of presentations and excursions, including to Swiss Saxony.

A common theme shared in almost all the presentations was the distinct connection between identity and hate – that is, between how people understand their identity and the strong sentiments of resentment they develop.

We are currently witnessing a crisis of identity in the Western world, and it is leading to very concerning developments.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the communist enemy was gone. Western values had prevailed against a radical and largely fake form of socialism but lost the rival that defined them and infused their national and political being with meaning.

NATO and the EU successfully expanded east throughout. Political ideologies become secondary. So did national identities. The differences between major political parties became miniscule. Cultural diversity flourished and migration increased.

As a result, some people have been feeling that their values are attacked as outdated and that they are looked down upon by the liberal, city-dwelling leftists and dominant news outlets. That their voices are not heard and do not matter. That a party is going on, but they are not invited by the major parties.

The feeling of being left behind and without a viable, respected identity was cultivated by the abundance of “alternative” online media. “Alternative” media has been on the rise and living off the fear associated with lost identity.

Populists present simple answers. As we have learned throughout history, the simplest one is to look for a scapegoat. Present-day hate is not about revenge because there is nothing to avenge. This hate aims to give an identity.

Our world is developing faster than ever before. It requires adaptation. Populists resist adaptation and promise resistance. They argue for the preservation of the old world, of the old values. They warn of collapse, of decay.

Their narrative is false. Of course, we are not living in a utopia, but the world has probably never been a better place to live in. Populism is based on living in nostalgia while ignoring history books. Even radical approaches, like the deportations of people with migration backgrounds, as recently demanded by a right-wing meeting in Germany, would not bring back the “good old days” because they just never existed.

So what next?

We need to revitalize Western identity and imbue it with strong moral values as well as demands.

We need to give people a renewed sense of meaning and purpose within a democratic and liberal context.

We need to call out the enemies of the West, the enemies of democracy, but at the same time, seek greater inclusion of those who currently feel forgotten and left behind.

Our civil communities need to identify hate for what it is, show courage in supporting the victims, and punish the perpetrators accordingly.

We must not tire of explaining why certain narratives are untrue and what motivations stand behind spreading them. We must show the past for what it was to avoid repeating past mistakes.

This will not be easy to do, but it is the only way our precious liberties could survive.

That night, there were 30 people at the bar. According to the polls, 11 of them will vote AfD in September. But 19 will not. And all 30 enjoyed the same beer.



# Midsummer Darkness

## *A visit to the Jewish community of Stockholm, where everything changed*

February 2024

**Peter Lebenswerd**

On the morning of February 2, 2024, a Swedish news flash appeared on my phone containing the surreal information that my friend and chairperson of the Council of Jewish Communities in Sweden, Aron Verstånding, together with two other Swedish Jews, had been the targets of a planned terror attack by Iranian agents operating in Sweden.

The plan was for the three Swedish Jews to be murdered, and their lives had been monitored in detail by the terrorists, but, luckily, the police managed to stop the attacks in time.

Although the conspiracy was plotted already in 2021, the news sent shock waves through the local Jewish community, especially since Swedish police claimed similar plans are probably still in the making.

Moreover, it added an additional layer to an already very tense atmosphere that I experienced first-hand in Sweden in the aftermath of the attacks of October 7, 2023.

The current situation made me think about the old practice in one of the synagogues of the Swedish capital of Stockholm to recite a special prayer for the king's well-being.

This prayer has been part of Jewish prayer services for centuries all over the world and is partly rooted in the idea that the well-being of a country is historically connected to the well-being of its Jewish residents. What was somewhat peculiar about the way it has been recited in this synagogue was that it was often sung to the tune of the Swedish national anthem.

For many, this was not so much an expression of patriotism or even loyalty as of the striving and, indeed, the success of Jewish integration into Swedish society almost 250 years after the arrival of the first Jew.

After some disturbing facts were revealed about the conduct of parts of the royal family during the years of the Holocaust, it was decided in a stormy board meeting to stop saying the prayer altogether. Those who had been in favor of keeping it in place were upset. What signals, they asked, will this send to society and to us? Are we not an integral part of Swedish society?

Perhaps, in an unintended hint of future changes of attitude, the prayer for the State of Israel and the IDF remained in place.

All of this has become highly symbolic since October 7. I arrived for a visit to my native community a month into the war between Israel and Hamas. My hosts wanted me to speak about the situation in Israel and help deal with its effects on local Jewry.

I was born and raised in Jewish Stockholm and, for years, worked in a central position in the community, among other things, as an educator. There are about 20,000 Jews in Sweden and around 10,000 in the Swedish capital. An estimated 4,000 of these are affiliated in one way or another

with the central Jewish community organization of Stockholm, as well as with synagogues, youth movements, summer camps, cultural institutions, and more.

In addition to being a son of the community, I have had the privilege to teach and lead its members throughout the years in various contexts, and after having moved to Israel, I still frequently go back to run activities.

I mention all of this because never before had I experienced an atmosphere like the one I experienced visiting again in October and November 2023, only a month after my previous visit. One month, but a world apart.

The people I met before October 7 were the same people I grew up with. I don't mean that only literally but also in the way they used to relate to Jewish life as part of Swedish society.

Like almost every Jewish diaspora community, its members had their differences of opinion on what Jewish life should look like, what the relationship to Israel should consist of, what strategies would secure a Jewish future in the country, and how to remain an integral part of society. This last point, the importance of being an integral part of Swedish society, was shared by the vast majority of Jews.

This could perhaps be illustrated by the arguably most exotic of Swedish holidays: "Midsummer."

Being a pagan-rooted holiday, it is celebrated around the longest day of the year and carries a mix of old traditions, like dancing around a maypole, and modern customs, such as enjoying a feast of herring, potatoes, and strawberries. It is often perceived as exotic both because of its obvious pagan roots as well as the way it is celebrated in the wondrous Swedish nature, often at summer houses on some of the country's thousands of islands.

Despite its origins, it has, however, evolved over time to represent the celebration of "Swedishness" par excellence.

Due to Sweden's more than 200 years of absence of war and having never been occupied by a foreign nation, not even during the Second World War, there has never really been a Swedish day of celebrating independence like many other countries have. It would take until 2005 to officially institute such a holiday, the "National Day," out of a wish by some political leaders to boost national sentiments. However, the National Day failed to attract the masses, possibly due to its somewhat artificial nature.

The "real" Swedish national holiday, people would tell you, already exists: Midsummer, and it is indeed sometimes referred to as the unofficial National Day of Sweden.

Despite its rather un-Jewish nature, the vast majority of Swedish Jews celebrate Midsummer and have done so for generations.

I even personally know of quite a few Holocaust survivors who arrived in Sweden in the 1940s and, within a few years' time, made sure to acquire a modest Swedish summer house and to celebrate Midsummer with all their, almost exclusively Jewish, friends.

It was a strong symbol of belonging in their new home, Sweden. That the holiday always falls on a Friday-Saturday creates a challenge if one observes Shabbat. To solve this, numerous Midsummer Shabbat gatherings were initiated, which integrated ingredients of both worlds.

The integrated occasions symbolized how Swedish Jews have perceived themselves for generations in relation to Sweden. Sweden, their homeland.

That is, I would dare to say, until October 7, 2023.

If anything may symbolize the sudden transformation I witnessed, it is a building, a physical space.

I am referring to one of the greatest projects of the Jewish community of Stockholm in decades, its new Center building, called the “Bayit.”

The building was to be integrated into the structure of the Jewish elementary school and kindergarten. It underscored the main purpose: to serve as a “bayit,” Hebrew for “home,” for the Jews of Stockholm of all ages and backgrounds where cultural events, sports, educational, and religious activities would take place under one roof.

But there was also an additional explicitly stated purpose to the new Center: it was to be open, even in a literal sense, to Swedish society.

No more should the Jews hide their identity and culture; it was time to share it with society and thereby help normalize Jewish life and culture in that society. It was as if to say: it is not enough anymore that Jews celebrate Midsummer; we must enable the reverse; Jewish culture must be open and contribute openly to non-Jewish society as well.

This second purpose created a lot of heated internal debate about to what extent the Center would reflect Jewish tradition. But there was also the concern that it would be hard to maintain a high level of security if the Center was to be open to the public.

At the core of the debate, though, was the possible tension between the two purposes: would it be possible to both be a “Bayit,” a home for the Jews, and, at the same time, be a space of interaction with non-Jewish society?

The “Bayit” was eventually inaugurated, and a number of compromises were reached on the issues of controversy. It became clear relatively fast that it truly was a success story. The vast range of activities for the Jewish community members, combined with open cultural events, was impressive.

During my visit a few weeks after October 7, however, the character of this physical space had undergone a radical transformation.

Instead of being a center of Jewish culture open to Swedish society, it now more resembled a fortress.

Already, when approaching the street where it is located, one could discern security guards and Swedish police guarding the place, visible from afar.

Parents of school and preschool children rushed in and out of the building to avoid staying on the street for too long. The street seemed all of a sudden a great danger. The expression on their faces cannot be described as anything other than fear.

On the inside, however, it seemed that the original, first purpose of the building paradoxically had reached its ultimate peak: it had truly become a “bayit,” a home for Jews. Or perhaps even a perceived safehaven.

The building was designed so that the cafeteria and the open library are surrounded by balconies where the day school classrooms are located. In the morning hours of the pre-October 7 days, the place was usually quiet and empty except for the schoolchildren and their teachers. Now, this was not the case anymore.

Apart from the Israeli flags, the huge signs with the words “Am Yisrael Chai” (the people of Israel live), the paper hearts created by the pupils in the day school with the names of the kidnapped Israelis, the most striking sight was that suddenly Jews of all ages were present at almost all hours of the day, seemingly, for totally different reasons.

Working people seemed to have found reasons to sit and “work from home” in the Bayit cafeteria instead of at home or at the office. Elderly people seemed to have realized a sudden need to visit the kosher food shop and then decided to stay and drink coffee in the building for hours. In the afternoon, teenagers who learn in public high schools (there are no Jewish ones) decided to hang out in the Bayit instead of somewhere else.

I asked some of the people doing their everyday work on a laptop why they chose to be there. Some answered that they wanted to be close to their children learning in the school and that it made them feel more in control in case “something would happen.”

An elderly lady told me she spent a large part of the day in the building just to “be among your own.” Another woman explained that the atmosphere “outside” was unbearable and that only inside this building, surrounded by Israeli flags, Jewish children, and friends, could she “breathe normally.”

It seemed like what, at first glance, looked like many different reasons. Yet they were actually one and the same: to just be in the “Bayit,” to be “at home.”

What happened? How is it possible that what just weeks before had been a completely normal existence for the Jewish minority was suddenly perceived as so unbearable that one had to come to the Jewish community center just to “breathe?” Was this view even representative among local Jews?

It turns out that it was.

In the wake of the attack by Hamas in Israel and the subsequent war, Sweden, like many other countries, experienced a sharp increase in expressions of antisemitism in public spaces, social media, schools, and workplaces.

To learn how Swedish Jews experienced the situation, the Jewish Central Council commissioned a survey among adult members of the Jewish congregations in the main cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, and Helsingborg.

The survey was based on responses from 690 members and was conducted in mid-November 2023. Among other findings, 71 percent of the respondents felt that it had become much more unsafe to live with an open Jewish identity in Sweden during the past month.

More than four out of five claimed they felt insecure about wearing Jewish symbols. Eighty percent stated that there are areas in Sweden that they felt were unsafe specifically because of antisemitism.

Arguably, the most dramatic result, especially in relation to the history of Jews in Sweden, is that close to 80 percent stated they believed that the insecurity and unsafety involved in living with an open Jewish identity would worsen in the coming years. As many as 46 percent of the respondents stated that they had recently discussed the possibility of moving from Sweden, antisemitism being the dominant reason.

Antisemitism and threats against Jews are not new to Sweden, and neither are expressions of hatred against Israel. In fact, one of my earliest memories is from when I had to evacuate the Jewish day school in first grade due to a bomb threat.

But the latest events contained some new ingredients that could perhaps help explain what, to some extent, looks like a sudden collapse in the confidence of the very future of Jews in Sweden.

The people I spoke to, regardless of age, expressed the same basic feelings of shock or rather a series of shocks, the first shock being the scope and brutality of the attack against Israel itself and the following were related to local phenomena that created fear, a sense of insecurity and maybe above all a deep disappointment and mistrust in the civil society they call theirs.

While politicians strongly condemned the attack against Israel, citizens of Sweden, initially almost all with an immigrant background from Middle Eastern countries, took to the streets in major Swedish cities in large celebrations of the Hamas slaughter, kidnappings, and rapes, such as were seen in other countries at the same time.

These acts of mass celebration in Sweden were condemned by government officials, but the mental damage was already done.

Following the celebrations came the mass demonstrations, with tens of thousands of people calling, among other things, for the destruction of Israel. In the context of the psychological impact on local Jewry, these other rallies were not at all confined anymore to the population with an immigrant background but included thousands of Swedish activists, often on the political left but not only.

In one of these early demonstrations in Stockholm, I witnessed some of the classical paradoxes of antisemitism in front of my very eyes when a neo-Nazi party and a party on the left involuntarily happened to line up next to each other, both holding signs stating: “crush Zionism.” Only the party symbols differed.

Some of these large demonstrations began even before Israel had started its operation in Gaza. As a leader of the Jewish community put it: “It was as if the very slaughter of Jews in Israel itself was enough to trigger more antisemitism.”

The psychological effect of being in deep pain and fear following the attack on Israel and, instead of social support, witnessing these reactions was devastating for some members of the community.

As one Jewish mother put it: “All of these people who either celebrated or condoned the slaughter of Jews in Israel are the people my children in a few years might study with, have as their colleagues at work and who I will have to trust with my life when visiting the doctor. They are part of the future of Sweden.”

Another shock and apparently equally psychologically devastating was the disappointment in the silence of non-Jewish friends and colleagues in the face of the events of October 7.

One man related to me in a sad voice that “in the wake of all other catastrophes and terror attacks, people put up flags on their social media in support and reach out to friends who are affected. I always do it myself. But now, when I would need that support – utter silence.”

Adding to the shock of disappointment in society was a very early public declaration of support for “Palestine” and against “genocide” in a leading Swedish newspaper by hundreds of Swedish cultural workers and celebrities, including beloved singers and actors, who had not with one word condemned the attack against Israel.

The impact on local Jews on seeing these acts by people who minutes before had been not only admired artists and performers but who were part and parcel of shaping the cultural identity that made many Swedish Jews what they are cannot be underestimated.

A sentence I heard repeatedly was: “Who would have known that all that antisemitism was there, hidden under the surface all this time.”

Some people I spoke to even talked about an emerging identity crisis as a result.

When I offered to arrange meetings with local Jewish teenagers to discuss the situation, the demand was beyond anything I could imagine.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

I had to arrange many separate events for there to be enough space, and they went on for hours. Their need to talk about everything from perceived indifference from non-Jewish friends to horrifying expressions of antisemitism in schools and on social media was enormous.

In December 2023, a major Swedish newspaper published interviews with 30 Swedish Jews about the antisemitism they had experienced since October 7.

It was a very sad read. A theme that repeated itself in these stories was a new sense of not feeling “safe” anywhere anymore, not even in your own home, after several incidents where local Jews had been threatened and sometimes even assaulted in their homes.

One of the interviewed persons said: “I myself have been lecturing about antisemitism for years, and I realize I didn’t even know what it was – until now.”

Deeply affected by all my encounters, I left Sweden with a heavy heart, and sadly enough, the situation did not seem to improve.

In January 2024, more than 1,000 Swedish singers signed a public petition calling to prevent Israel from taking part in the European Song Contest set to take place in the southern Swedish city of Malmö, infamous for its problems of antisemitism for years.

Adding to all the sentiments mentioned above among local Jews, it is impossible not to note the irony and tragic symbolism of these calls to forbid expressions of Israeli culture in the very city Jews have been departing from for more than a decade, in large part because of its failure to handle local antisemitism.

On a very concrete level, the feeling of insecurity also increased after a hand grenade was thrown into the Israel Embassy of Stockholm in late January, after which police tightened security measures even more around Jewish institutions.

Those who have delved into Jewish history often recognize the unsettling blend of shock on the one hand and a chilling familiarity on the other when confronted with new dramatic events.

The deep core questions the Jews of Stockholm and Sweden are now asking themselves about what it all means in terms of their sense of identity, their relationship to Swedish society, to the state of Israel, and the future of their children are questions that have all been asked before.

Next year, the Jewish Community in Sweden is about to celebrate 250 years. My main fear is that for at least some of my friends in that community who plan their future, there will not be enough time to wait for the answers to these questions. And the newly stationed armed police force guarding the entrance to the “Bayit,” the Jewish home, is there as a reminder of that fact every single day.



# Learning Nothing from History

## *A different take on the debate about teaching the history of the Holocaust after October 7*

February 2024

**Uriya Shavit**

Last week, Israel's Education Ministry decided high school students would not be required to be tested on the history of the Holocaust on their mandatory matriculation exam (Bagrut) this year. The argument is that, following October 7, pupils are too emotionally distressed to deal with the topic.

Minister Yoav Kisch took a lot of heat for the decision, which high-ranking education officials made after serious consideration.

It is a classic case of heads I win, tails you lose. If the minister had not followed a call made by the professionals, the media and certain publicity-eager institutions would blame him for privileging nationalist politics over the psychological needs of teenagers.

The argument that allowing students to avoid the horrors of the past is not a logical way of helping them deal with the horrors of the present makes sense. Still, it is curious to see the same people who usually degrade politicians and sanctify experts' opinions speak differently when they disagree with what the experts say.

Does it matter, anyway?

The underlying assumption in the debate is that if pupils don't learn about the Holocaust for their final exam, they will graduate knowing nothing about it.

This is true: If a topic is not mandatory for the Bagrut, it is as if it does not exist.

Yet the sad reality is that the inclusion of a topic also does not achieve much.

That's because Israeli matriculation exams in the humanities suffer from two main problems typical to contemporary education: they are too ambitious and too forgiving.

They aim to cultivate kids who think contextually and critically, and they end up producing graduates who know almost nothing.

The key to learning history is to master the basic facts of the period studied: dates, names, places, and concepts.

This is done, in part, through memorization. Once the facts are solidly ingrained, learning more about contexts and processes is possible. Then, and only then, meaningful individual comparative, critical, and original observations may emerge.

Memorizing facts is not a way to suffocate independent thinking. It is a way to build it. Memorization establishes lasting orientation. Without orientation, any knowledge acquired is shaky and quickly lost.

If it were up to me, matriculation exams in history would comprise nothing more than 50 multiple-choice questions on facts, and matriculation exams in Bible would require nothing but the recitation of 100 verses.

To be sure, kids anyhow still memorize in a chew-and-spit manner for their finals (sometimes from synopses written by their teachers). Yet, instead of memorizing the foundations of knowledge, they memorize abstractions.

There is little use in being able to note four reasons – no, let's make it two, four is too many – why the Nazi party came to power without knowing solidly what Nazi means and when precisely those two world wars happened.

Ministers of education and professors with good intentions think that in the Internet age, memorization is an anachronistic learning method. That is why so many young people nowadays feel lost. They can easily access knowledge but do not possess it. And it's not quite the same thing.

Some years ago, I saw a young teacher-soldier on campus talking with her friend near (what was then called) the Diaspora Museum.

They were preparing for a presentation they were due to give to a group of recruits and were struggling. "So, first there was Herzl, and then the Holocaust?" asked the young soldier.

If the matriculation exam in history required her to memorize a long list of dates, she would have attained the structure and the confidence needed to learn more by herself.

The words of the teacher-soldier alarmed me in another profound way.

Jewish history is more than a precursor to the Holocaust, while Zionism is not, historically, a belated reaction to it.

Yet because of the centrality the study and the memory of the Holocaust attained in Israeli society, some believe this to be the case.

Holocaust studies are overwhelming the study of everything historical in high schools. With the exception expected for this year, the proportion is 50-50 at the stages where it matters most.

How much of a public outcry would there be if the Ministry of Education had announced that this year, pupils could graduate without learning about the remarkable life story of Herzl, Jewish medieval sages, the universally unmatched Jewish contribution to science, the revival of the Hebrew language, or the Balfour Declaration?

There wouldn't be any at all because the reality is that also in ordinary years, it is possible to take the mandatory matriculation exam in history without answering one single question about any of the above.

The centrality that studying the Holocaust has gradually come to attain in Israeli schools marks a moral commitment. It manifests recognition of the crimes' unprecedented nature and their consequences, and gives substance to the vow "Never Again."

Yet the centrality also owes, in part, to another motivation. It is encouraged by the desire of educators and society at large to avoid the potential controversies and sensitivities that other chapters in Jewish and Zionist history involve in a deeply fragmented society.

And that is a more significant reason for concern than the absence of the Holocaust from one exam in one exceptional, tragic year.



# Head Held High

## *I am wearing my Magen David on the streets of Warsaw. Here is what happens*

November 2023

**Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias**

In the final lines of *The Plague*, Albert Camus writes of its protagonist, Dr Rieux: “None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could only be the record of what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.”

One would have thought that, in the face of the unprecedented antisemitic slaughter and pogrom against the civilian Jewish population perpetrated by the Palestinian Hamas on October 7, 2023, the entire democratic-liberal world would stand shoulder to shoulder with the victims, assuming the roles of these Camusian “healers.”

The opposite has happened.

A wave of genocidal antisemitism has flooded the world with shouts – in defiance of the law – of “Slaughter the Jews” heard in the streets of European capitals.

In one shocking event, at a Canadian university, a lecturer shouted at Jewish students handing out posters with pictures of those kidnapped by the murderous Hamas: “Go back to Poland, sharmuta” (whore in Arabic).

By attacking those standing up for the kidnapped, he was not defending the rights of Palestinians. Rather, he was outright praising anti-Jewish pogroms.

He knew, as did millions around the world, that now, at last, it was no longer possible, no longer necessary, to pretend to criticize the state of Israel in a civilized, legitimate, and entirely acceptable way.

Paradoxically, however, his call may make sense: these Jewish students would be today much safer in Warsaw than in Montreal.

There are disturbing incidents in Warsaw, too: a journalist and a radio station allowed antisemitic, denialist content about the events of October 7 to be preached on air; some in the liberal left-wing “elites” called Israel’s defensive actions “unacceptable” or “genocidal.”

However, none of these examples are comparable to what we observe in Western European countries, the US, and Canada – to say nothing of most Arab and Muslim countries.

One case is worth discussing in particular.

On October 21, a march protesting Israel’s military invasion of Gaza passed through the streets of Warsaw. The demonstrators carried Palestinian flags and banners with slogans, including “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

A banner with the words “Keep the world clean” pictured a trashcan with a symbolic Israeli flag inside. It caused particular outrage.

This banner was held and displayed in public by Marie Andersen, a Norwegian student at the Warsaw Medical University.

Its content and symbolism provoked international outrage and was unequivocally classified as a manifestation of antisemitism. This was confirmed by, among others, the President of Poland, the Mayor of Warsaw, as well as experts and organizations engaged in countering antisemitism.

During the march, the Nexta news service interviewed Andersen.

Her fundamental refusal to name and condemn the crimes committed by Hamas terrorists and her denial of the right of Jews to live in Israel and of the right of Israel to exist within its borders proved her actions to have purely antisemitic overtones.

What is more, she also posted on her Instagram a poster directly equating the state of Israel with the Nazi regime. This is classified as a form of antisemitism according to the Working Definition of Antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

The Working Definition states that antisemitism can be manifested, among other instances, by depriving Jews of their right to self-determination and applying double standards by requiring Israel to behave in a way that is not expected or required of any other democratic state.

Various Polish and international NGOs, including the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, submitted formal notifications to the Polish Prosecutor Office in Warsaw, requesting the opening of an investigation into the possible commission of the crime by Andersen.

They claim that Andersen has breached Article 126a of the Polish Criminal Code, which penalizes public incitement to commit a crime (genocide, participation in mass murder, discrimination) and praising it, as well as Article 256 para. 1 of the Polish Criminal Code, penalizing public incitement to hatred based on nationality and ethnicity.

They also called on the Rector of the Medical University of Warsaw to expel Andersen from the university, using all available disciplinary measures against her antisemitic behavior and, by doing so, protecting the rights and freedoms of other medical students, including Jewish and Israeli students.

All these proceedings are ongoing and are monitored closely. The reaction of the Polish state, represented here by the public prosecutor and public university, is of utmost importance for defining the attitude of Poland towards antisemitic hatred.

The problem of antisemitism in Poland is not marginal.

I have spoken about its various forms many times, both in the media and in academic literature.

However, it has an entirely different dimension from its genocidal variety, which today is becoming a common form of exercising “freedom of expression” by mobs demanding the annihilation of the Jewish people in the name of “protecting the human rights” of the Palestinian people.

Today, European countries, including those of central and eastern Europe, are faced with a considerable challenge and a test that will show whether the efforts made over the years to counter antisemitism were meaningful and carried out in a way that will defend Jews from hatred and violence.

On the streets of Warsaw, I wear my Magen David on my coat with my head held high.

This is no longer safe on the streets of Paris, Brussels, or Amsterdam.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

The reasons why I feel safe in Poland to express in public my position on the crimes committed by Hamas are complex and multifold, with one being perhaps of particular importance.

Poland's contemporary left has been formed in different ideological and historical contexts than its Western European counterparts.

At the same time, the European post-colonial discourse that has, in some of its manifestations, shifted and adopted narratives accusing Israel of being a colonial state, is absent in Poland, a state that has no colonial past.

Polish state and society can also be described as, to a large extent, pro-American and allied with the US.

In today's reality of the inversion of basic concepts such as perpetrator and victim, effect and cause, good and evil, every oasis of normality and honesty is worth its weight in gold.

This is what I consider Poland to be today.



# Boycott Harvard

## *An American university risks becoming an illegitimate entity*

October 2023

Uriya Shavit and Carl Yonker

Harvard University, once a glorious academic institution, is on the verge of losing its moral legitimacy.

Human rights activists, American patriots, Jews with a sense of pride, and any normal human being who thinks that the cold-blooded murder of babies and the kidnapping of elderly women is wrong must send a clear message to its administration: If your premises continue to serve as a hub for denials of the right of the state of the Jewish people to exist, the right of Harvard to exist will be questioned as well. If your premises continue to serve as a hub for antisemites, then it will be recognized as a hub for antisemites.

Freedom of expression is sacred and almost absolute. The freedom to boycott is sacred and almost absolute. Fine. The Harvard administration should be made to understand this works both ways.

A year and a half ago, the *Harvard Crimson*, the daily student newspaper of the Ivy League university, published an editorial endorsing the BDS movement. As analyzed in our Perspectives 14, this intellectually embarrassing piece failed to make clear whether its authors accept the existence of Israel in its internationally recognized borders. It more than hinted, though, that they do not.

Following the Hamas massacre of hundreds of civilians last Saturday, more than 30 student organizations at Harvard published the equivalence of a statement of support for Japan the day after Pearl Harbor or of Bin Laden the day after 9/11.

The text is almost as incomprehensible as the photos of the atrocities committed by Hamas militants in the Israeli south. It reads (according to the link appearing in *Politico*):

*We, the undersigned student organizations, hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.*

*Today's events did not occur in a vacuum. For the last two decades, millions of Palestinians in Gaza have been forced to live in an open-air prison. Israeli officials promise to "open the gates of hell," and the massacres in Gaza have already commenced. Palestinians in Gaza have no shelters for refuge and nowhere to escape. In the coming days, Palestinians will be forced to bear the full brunt of Israel's violence.*

*The apartheid regime is the only one to blame. Israeli violence has structured every aspect of Palestinian existence for 75 years. From systematized land seizures to routine airstrikes, arbitrary detentions to military checkpoints, and enforced family separations to targeted killings, Palestinians have been forced to live in a state of death, both slow and sudden.*

*Today, the Palestinian ordeal enters into uncharted territory. The coming days will require a firm stand against colonial retaliation. We call on the Harvard community to take action to stop the ongoing annihilation of Palestinians.*

Let us get the facts right.

Hamas, the governing power in Gaza following the elections there, is a branch of the Muslim Brothers movement that has, since its inception, denied the right of the Jewish people to exist.

The declared objective of Hamas, as presented in its Charter, is the total elimination of the state of Israel.

Hamas' worldview is informed, and the movement advances, deep-seated antisemitic views that deny the humanity of Jews.

Hamas is an open enemy of the United States and liberal values.

Hamas turned Gaza into a hell where women are oppressed and gays are thrown off balconies.

If Israel is a colonial enterprise, then so – and much more – are the United States, Canada, Australia, Argentina, and Saudi Arabia. Israel was founded based on a United Nations' General Assembly Resolution on a Partition Plan, which the Arab world rejected, and Hamas still rejects. Most populated Jewish towns and settlements before its establishment existed on lands purchased by Jews with money. Aside from the ancestral affinity between Jews and their land, the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel was consistent, while an Arab, or a Palestinian, nation-state never existed in that land.

To blame Israel for a defensive war against the mass killers of its civilians before the IDF even fired a shot is to effectively ask the main military ally of the United States in the Middle East to surrender without a fight to a declared enemy of America. That is the work of a fifth column. It borders on treason.

The signatories to the letter are cowards. Not only did they not publish their names, hiding behind student organizations, they later deleted the names of those organizations as well, fearing backlash. They don't mind inflaming violence as long as others bear the consequences.

Students have the right to be ignorant. Students have the right to show poor moral judgment.

Professors don't. Presidents of universities don't. That's because they are no longer students.

In response to the outrageous letter published by the Harvard student organizations, Harvard President Claudine Gay and the university's leadership issued a lengthy statement that made clear the only thing she cares about is not angering anyone.

Take this morally insipid sentence, for example:

*We are hopeful that, as a community devoted to learning, we can take steps that will draw on our common humanity and shared values in order to modulate rather than amplify the deep-seated divisions and animosities so distressingly evident in the wider world. Especially at such a time, we want to emphasize our commitment to fostering an environment of dialogue and empathy, appealing to one another's thoughtfulness and goodwill in a time of unimaginable loss and sorrow.*

The next day, perhaps fearing the backlash, Gay issued a shorter and somewhat more strongly worded statement.

What Gay did not do is unequivocally condemn the poor moral judgment and ignorance of some of her students and put the facts right.

What she did not do is unequivocally delegitimize those who deny the right of Israel to exist.

What she did not do is explain whether Harvard would allow students to deny the right of other nations and states to exist. Say, Iran or Russia.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

What she did not do is state whether she believes Israel is a colonial enterprise and an Apartheid state or not.

What she did not do is clarify whether, at Harvard, professors also have opinions.

It is unclear how Harvard became the signature of militant antisemitism disguised as progressive liberalism.

It is clear that Jews, pro-Zionists, or sane liberals cannot feel safe on a university campus where such views thrive.

And it is time those in charge there are made to realize this comes at a very costly public and financial price.





# The Witness

## *A failed Russian propaganda movie reveals a disturbing truth*

September 2023

Uriya Shavit

*The Guardian* recently reported on the failure of a new Russian propaganda feature movie, “The Witness.” It premiered in mid-August and turned out to be a box-office flop, revealing that Russians have little appetite for the lies of their regime.

“The Witness” tells the story of an esteemed fictional Belgian violinist named Daniel Cohen, a citizen of the world, who arrives in Kyiv in February 2022, days before the Russian invasion. He gets caught up in the fighting and witnesses a series of “inhuman crimes and bloody provocations by Ukrainian nationalists.”

According to the report, at one point, a Ukrainian commander is seen walking around with a copy of *Mein Kampf* while other Ukrainian soldiers pledge their allegiance to Adolf Hitler. As a witness to these unspeakable horrors, Cohen sets out to tell the world the “truth” about the conflict.

Vladimir Zelensky became Ukraine’s president following the success of a comical television series about an obscure schoolteacher who becomes president. In democracies, art inspires politics. In tyrannies, politics controls art.

Writing about the prospects of “The Witness,” Time Magazine noted that “sociologists say the public interest in following the war has waned, and people these days mainly want to escape from the gloom and doom of news from Ukraine.” Indeed, Russians largely fail to realize that they are not the victims here and that, ultimately, they will pay a price, too.

If war-mongering propaganda movies with a Daniel Cohen as their main character ring alarm bells in your head, then you have studied history.

Since the start of the Russian invasion, comparisons between the Nazi regime and Putin’s have been commonplace. A poster of Putin alongside Hitler is popular in several European capitals.

Analogies to Nazism and its crimes should be treated cautiously to avoid trivialization. Yet they are essential if we want to explain how precisely Nazism was exceptional and draw lessons for the present and the future.

Putin’s agenda echoes the shadows of Nazism on several crucial points.

Hitler sought at first to reunite German minorities with the homeland and erase the humiliation of the First World War. Putin seeks to do the same for Russians and erase what he sees as the Russian humiliation at the end of the Cold War.

It was easy for some Western elites to advance appeasement in the 1930s in part because Hitler’s early diplomatic crusades and ultimatums could be framed as concern for minority rights and for minimal national dignity.

Some in the West have been making the same mistake with regard to Putin's demands and constant whining since 2014. At present, the Russian dictator's only hope to end the Ukraine fiasco triumphant is for a Charles Lindbergh to become US president. Reading the latest polls by what the numbers rather than common sense say, there is a good chance Putin will get what he wants.

Hitler thrived on populist distaste for liberalism, modernism, and internationalism, and a yearning for romantic, primordial vitality. So does Putin. Hitler exhibited total disregard for human life and international law. So does Putin. For Hitler, truth meant nothing. Same for Putin.

The main difference between Nazism and Putinism is that Hitler's ideology was grounded in the belief that Jews are an absolute evil, that they are leading a global conspiracy against the German people, and, ultimately, that they must be exterminated.

Irrational antisemitism defined Nazi fascism, rather than just served as a mobilizing tool.

The most terrifying aspect of Hitler's strategic actions was how much they were driven by the lunatic dehumanization of Jews that was at the center of his worldview. That is what made Hitler unique compared to other dictators and largely led to his downfall.

In contrast, Putin has been a friend and protector of the Jewish minority in Russia and is not a conscious antisemite.

Yet movies like "The Witness" – could they really not think of a less generic name than Daniel Cohen? – reveal a complicated and disturbing truth.

From day one of the war, Putin has been obsessed with the lie that the aggression was intended to de-Nazify Ukraine: Putin, savior of the Jews, savior of humanism.

The obsession does not wane. Just this month, Putin argued the West installed a Jewish president in Ukraine in order to cover up for the country's glorification of Nazism. Three months ago, he argued that his many Jewish friends told him Zelensky was not a Jew and accused Ukraine of supporting neo-Nazism.

If you try hard, you can find grains of cynical rationality in Putin's discourse. Because opposition to antisemitism became a conventional wisdom in Western politics, accusing Ukraine of pro-Nazism could seem as potentially effective legitimizing rhetoric.

It is also understandable why Putin would like to re-live the Russian heroism of the Second World War. The final stages of that war are the most glorious period in Russia's modern history that witnessed mostly defeats, withdrawals, and support for evil.

Still, no matter how one spins Putin's obsession with the false claim that his war is a campaign against Nazism, and no matter how one tries to rationalize his obsession with Zelensky's Jewish identity, an uncomfortable fact remains.

Eight decades after the Second World War, an existential struggle for liberal democracy is taking place in Europe, and once again, the forces of tyranny and falsehood base their aggression on a fictitious narrative that has Jews at its core.

# Notes from Bucharest

## *On Ceausescu's peculiar comeback, the cowardice of Russian elites, and the decline of Jewish communities*

August 2023

**Uriya Shavit**

I am standing in front of the interior ministry's balcony in Bucharest.

This is the fourth time I pass there, but only now, on a guided walking tour about the history of communism, I realize it belongs to an image that captivated me in junior high school.

It was December 21, 1989.

The last Stalinist despot in Europe, Nicolae Ceausescu, stood in front of thousands of organized supporters.

Days after vast demonstrations began in Timisoara, West Romania, he was trying to show he was still in control, passionately uttering the usual cliches.

The crowd refused to play its role and remained defiantly silent.

In his desperation, Ceausescu promised to increase wages. To his great shock and horror, the rally turned into an angry demonstration.

The television broadcast was interrupted. A full-scale, bloody revolution began. Four days later, Ceausescu and his wife Elena were executed after a brief trial.

It was the most violent of the liberation revolutions in Eastern Europe, and it gave the final seal to the demise of a system of government that brought oppression and poverty to millions.

The seeming spontaneous events projected – romantically – that no tyrant can stand in the way of a people when united.

Years later, historians argued that much of the ado was staged and that the revolution was guided by the reforming Soviet Union. Or the CIA. Or both.

What actually happened remains subject for debate.

The one issue not debated is that hundreds of Romanian citizens lost their lives in a courageous, brief fight for freedom.

They are commemorated in a hideous monument in what became the Revolution Square, facing the balcony.

History is written with the wisdom of hindsight. Thus, there is a tendency to see the downfall of communism in the late 1980s as inevitable.

It was not.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

The communist regimes of Europe were, perhaps, doomed – but could have possibly survived much longer, and wane through much greater bloodshed.

In large part, they collapsed the way they did and when they did because dissidents were willing to fight them, with tremendous costs, also at times when the ultimate defeat of communism was nothing but assured.

A year and a half into the war in Ukraine, it is time to wonder why there are so few such dissidents in present-day fascist Russia.

Their conditions are much better – with the borders still open and with access to Western media easier than in the 1970s and 1980s.

I had a chance to speak with a number of Russian professors and professionals when the scope of Putin's war crimes was already known. They were remarkably self-centered, whining about the sanctions and about how Russia, a failed kleptocracy, is not respected on the world stage.

These Russians believe that they are in a win-win situation.

It is difficult to judge those who remain silent. But those who actively support the regime in any way should be made to understand that their crimes will never be forgiven.

On the day of Prigozhin's mutiny (the proof that farce sometimes precedes tragedy), I watched a Russian professor who parroted the regime on the BBC. This Lady Haw-Haw and her likes should be blacklisted by every law enforcement agency and academic institution in the West and, sooner rather than later, pay for their barks.

The so-called oligarchs are a league of their own in the sad affair called Russia. There is now talk in Western capitals about a deal-to-save-legal-ordeals that would allow them to get some of their assets back in return for giving some of it to Ukraine.

A more reasonable deal would be a ticket out of potential prison terms in return for fully conceding their assets and taking a clear stand against Putin.

Moral cowardice in existential wars should be costly.

Putin's failure to divide NATO and bring the West to its knees is all the more astounding given the public sentiments across the continent.

Romania is a case in point.

In the 1980s, Ceausescu was one of a kind. Reinventing macroeconomics, and without any checks or balances to moderate his growing tyranny, his megalomaniac initiatives and determination to wipe out his country's debt made his version of communism particularly hellish and grotesque.

I was thus surprised to learn from our guide on the communism walking tour that not a few Romanians are nostalgic about the days when they waited hours in line for groceries and gasoline that the utopian regime could not provide.

In a survey done in 2018 by Isogep, 64.3% of Romanians had a favorable opinion of Ceausescu—more than any other Romanian President in modern history.

It is not difficult to find examples in Bucharest.

Says a 27-year-old, self-employed, newlywed, and soon-to-be father:

“Yes, he was a dictator. Yet everything we have in the city that works, that is grand, it is from his time. There were food shortages, but somehow no one was hungry. He brought the country to zero debt, the only country in the world that does not owe anyone money.

“Back then, if someone wandered around the streets at noon, the police would put him in jail for four months. When released, he was forced to find some job, any kind of job.

“Today, we have freedom, but what is this freedom? There is so much corruption, and so much is controlled by the United States and by the European Union. Almost everyone is either poor or very rich and there is hardly a middle class. I don’t long for the communist era, but you have to recognize it for what it was.”

Twenty-seven-years-old. That means he did not experience the horrors himself.

“Oh, a lot of people from my parents’ generation will tell you the same thing.”

Under Ceausescu, home ownership reached the highest level in Europe – 96% percent, according to our guide on the communism tour. The apartments of the ruling class were bigger. “Everyone was equal, but party officials were more equal,” she says. Still, people had a sense of security.

There is a more trivial reason for Ceausescu-stalgia. “Many of today’s grownups were children back then. What they actually miss is their childhood.”

The most imposing of Ceausescu’s lunacies is the gratuitously large Palace of Parliament. Only a Pharaoh would launch such a project.

Sadly, tourists come to Egypt for the pyramids, and the Palace of Parliament became the symbol of Bucharest and a main tourist attraction.

When it comes to grandeur, functioning democracies have a handicap: they work to benefit their societies, not to immortalize their leaders.

Communism is not the only shadow that haunts Romania.

During the Second World War, it allied with Nazi Germany. Approximately 400,000 Romanian Jews, half of the Jewish population, were murdered in the Holocaust, the majority at Romanian hands.

Legislation to require comprehensive teaching of those crimes in Romanian high schools is now the focus of public debate.

The rising political force in the country, The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), opposes the plan. Its leader argues that the Holocaust should be taught only in the broader context of Romanian history.

That the country does not do a good job in dealing with its pro-Nazi past is obvious, even for a passerby.

An exhibition at the National Museum celebrates the life of Mircea Carp, a journalist who fought communism from exile. He is 100. The exhibition discusses his time in a training camp in Nazi Germany as if that is a normal, morally justifiable part of a patriotic CV.

Some Romanians try to make a difference.

I meet Luniana Mindru in her office at the center of Bucharest. She is Program Coordinator at American Councils for International Education in Romania.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

Since 2017, the organization has taken annually 15 university students on an Eli Wiesel two-week study tour in several European countries to learn about the Holocaust and its lessons.

Mindru said last year they had 160 applications—more men than women, with a surprising presence of applicants from military schools.

Upon completing their program, participants organize workshops on the Holocaust in their universities. So far, facing the dark pages of Romania's past was a task all participants managed. Those who register have some prior interest and empathy for the topic to begin with.

The initiative is largely financed by the United States but started and is run by Romanians.

At the Choral Synagogue in Bucharest, I meet the Gabai, Hazan, and Guide. He introduces himself as Gilbert Shein. He is 50. I never met a person who talks so fast.

Shein says Jews in Romania, including those visibly identifiable as such, do not face antisemitic-motivated physical attacks. Verbal attacks are rare.

That does not mean that Romanians recognize the crimes of their fathers. "Ask people on the street, they will say Romanians were not responsible for killing Jews. That they were victims in the war. There is no serious education about the Holocaust in schools."

Romanian Jewry is a forgotten community. Pioneers of Zionism and one of the largest extractions, their contribution to Israel has never been duly recognized.

According to Shein, only 3,000 Jews live in Romania today. On an average Saturday, the synagogue, one of the most beautiful in Europe, brings together no more than 30 attendees.

A partition wall was placed in the middle of the hall because most female attendees are in their eighties and cannot climb the stairs to Ezrat Nashim.

The synagogue is more a relic and a museum than the prayer house of a vibrant community.

The challenge repeats itself across Europe. Dwindling Jewish publics are largely secular. Synagogues cannot bring them together as a community and preserve their identity.

A few days before visiting Romania, I was in Vidin, north-west Bulgaria, where the beautiful local synagogue has been reconstructed and will open in September.

There are no more than 20 Jews in Vidin. The revived synagogue will thus serve as a general exhibition hall—a reminder of a Jewish past, not a hub for a Jewish presence.

Shein said most Israelis who visit Bucharest, and thousands do, do not visit his synagogue. They have other priorities.

The second surviving historical and equally beautiful synagogue in Bucharest, Mare, became a Holocaust museum. The exhibition is dull and largely in Romanian.

There are plans to build a more advanced museum, but for now, they are just plans.

On a Friday morning, at the height of the tourism season, the museum is empty.

I cannot blame Israelis who do not wish to spend their summer holiday in the footsteps of the challenges to democracy or the fragility of Jewish existence.

It is 37 degrees outside. At the ice cream shop, a child cries to his mother in Hebrew, "You said we'll go swimming."

This summer offers no escape.

# Past Present

## *Lithuania and Latvia struggle with complicated histories*

August 2023

Carl Yonker

I descend to the basement of the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in the former KGB building in Vilnius.

Among the first exhibits I see is a holding cell containing a pile of bags filled with shredded documents.

For three years, ending in 1991, the local KGB employees destroyed or removed documents to conceal and eliminate any evidence of the crimes they committed against the Lithuanian people during the Soviet occupation of the country.

They feared the past would come back to haunt them.

The bags of shredded documents symbolize the Museum's long obfuscation of Lithuanian history and only recent efforts to more fully account for the activities that took place within and under the auspices of those who worked in the building.

While commonly known as the KGB Museum, the building has a more complicated past.

In 1940–1941, it was the prison of the NKVD/NKGB before then serving as the headquarters of the Gestapo, *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD, SS intelligence), and the SD's *Sonderkommando* (special squad, YB) of local Lithuanian volunteers who participated in the slaughter of Lithuania's Jews in 1941–1944.

The KGB then reoccupied the building in 1944.

However, until 2011, there was not a single exhibit in the museum (known until 2018 as the "Museum of Genocide Victims") about the Holocaust or about Lithuanian complicity in Nazi crimes. The "genocide" the museum dubiously referred to was that of non-Jewish Lithuanians murdered by the Soviets.

Moreover, some Lithuanians who helped the Nazis perpetrate the Holocaust, that is, in murdering their fellow Lithuanians, were lauded and praised for resisting the Soviets.

As other countries in Europe, Lithuania confronts a complicated past – the nation was a victim of injustice but also the perpetrator of injustice.

On the ruins of what used to be the Jewish quarter of Vilnius, sculptures, and signs remind visitors that here there existed once a thriving Jewish community that led intellectual and social currents whose marks are still felt.

Jerusalem of the North, it was called.

It is a beautiful city, but the Jewish quarter is now just a memory.



Not much on the streets tells how Jewish life in the country ended. The local Jewish museum does an excellent job, though.

In Riga, the past is also a complicated matter.

Known as the Corner House, the building of its KGB museum has a history that is almost the same as that of the one in Vilnius, with one major exception: following Latvia's independence in 1990, Latvian police occupied the place and used it until 2008.

That such a grim building where “undesirable elements” were taken, interrogated, held, and sometimes executed was then used by police in a newly independent democratic Latvia adds another layer of complexity.

It was said that Latvian police used it because the country was poor and resources were limited.

The Žanis Lipke Memorial museum in Riga is dedicated to the courage and humanism of a person who, during World War II, rescued more than 50 Jews from the Riga Ghetto. Lipke hid them under the woodshed on his property and helped them escape Latvia.

The engaging and passionately administrated museum pays tribute to his heroism.

Hundreds of school kids visit it every year. By learning about Lipke, they learn something about the darkest chapter in the history of their nation.

But they don't learn the full story.

Some 450 Latvians were recognized for saving Jews. The majority was indifferent, and the extermination of Latvia's Jews was largely done at the hands of local collaborators, and with exceptional ruthlessness.

It was Latvians who turned on their neighbors and participated in their persecution, confinement, and murder under Nazi auspices. The most notorious was Viktors Arajs, a Latvian collaborator with the Nazi SS who formed the Arajs Kommando that was subordinate to the SD. The Arajs Kommando actively participated in the slaughter of thousands of Jews, Roma, and the mentally ill.

It would be good if schoolchildren complement their visit to the Lipke Memorial with a visit to the museum of the Jewish community. There they will see more of what had been lost due to the crimes of the German Nazis and the Latvians who were all too happy to assist them.

The Spanish-American philosopher and essayist George Santayana's argued that we must remember the past or else we are doomed to repeat it.

The essayist David Rieff asked in his provocative 2016 book *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* whether there are benefits to not remembering, even forgetting.

Rieff suggested historical memories don't so much convey lessons learned from the past as they do cultural biases and illusions, sometimes with negative consequences for society and politics, becoming “the toxic adhesive needed to cement old grudges.”

Tony Judt cautioned that museums give us “permission” to “let go and forget.”

Yet there is a solution to those risks.

It is not an easy one.

To tell the full story, even if it pains. And then to keep on telling it.



# **The Shiites Who Love You**

## *An all-Jewish town, joint ceremonies, and the surprising offer of a Rabbi*

July 2023

**Rafael Nabizade**

In March 2023, Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Israel for the first time, bringing years of prospering security, economic and tourist relations between the countries to a new high.

For some, the friendship between Israel and the Shiite neighbor of Iran is a surprise.

Not for me.

I am a secular Shiite Muslim from Azerbaijan, and since my childhood, I have been interested in Jewish history, traditions, and culture. My affection for Judaism reflects a deeply rooted tradition in my country.

Azerbaijan's Jewish community comprises Ashkenazi, Georgian, and Mountain (Caucasus) Jews and has existed for thousands of years.

The Mountain Jews claim their ancestors came to the region following the Babylonian Exile.

Baku's European Jewish community was the largest in the South Caucasus. The city's industrialization following the 1850s oil boom attracted qualified immigrants, including Ashkenazi Jews.

Despite making up only 4.5% of the total population in 1913, the local Jewish community played a prominent role in advancing medicine, law, and business.

Red Town in the Quba district in the northeast of the country is the world's only remaining all-Jewish town outside of Israel. It owes its name to the red-tiled roofs of its houses.

The Jewish presence in the region dates back 2,600 years. Approximately 3,000 people live today in Red Town, speaking a unique dialect of Persian, Judeo-Tat, among other languages.

The "Jerusalem of the Caucasus" has two synagogues. One is the Six Dome Synagogue, which is open only in the summer. The Gilaki synagogue opens its doors for prayers in winter. The Museum of the Mountain Jews has recently opened, documenting a rich history and showing that history to be an inseparable part of Azeri history.

Azerbaijan is an example of Jewish-Muslim coexistence. The country has always been proud of this heritage, promoting equality and tolerance among all faiths, and enabling the Jewish community to thrive and prosper in ways unfamiliar in other parts of the Muslim world.

It is common for Azerbaijanis to celebrate holidays together. Non-Jews attend Seder meals, while Jews attend Easter and Nowruz celebrations.

I took part in numerous Jewish holiday celebrations held in both Ashkenazi and Mountain Jews synagogues.

## Perspectives 2023-2025 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

In December 2021, I joined other non-Jewish Azeri guests in Hanukkah celebrations in Baku led by Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Shneur Segal. We prayed together and lit the candles of the Menorah.

Rabbi Segal also hosted me for a Shabbat dinner at the synagogue in Baku. When the Rabbi poured kosher wine for me to drink, I kindly declined, reminding him gently that I am a Muslim. He quipped by saying that when a Rabbi pours it, you cannot refuse. I drank.

The day before Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Israel, one of my friends, a Mountain Jew from Red Town, called to congratulate me on the occasion.

He told me that local Islamic leaders presented him with an award for helping build a mosque in a nearby town. The Muslim community had been unable to complete the construction due to financial and technical difficulties. However, over the course of two months, he was able to raise funds and secure the necessary permits to get construction started again.

A few weeks ago, when I called a Shiite Azeri friend to set a time to meet during my visit home to Baku, he told me he would not make it. The reason: he was busy meeting with the leadership of a local synagogue about raising funds to build a mikveh for the community.

Such is coexistence in Azerbaijan – communities helping each other and combining their efforts, intellect, and kindness.

Iran, Azerbaijan's southern neighbor and another predominantly Shiite Muslim nation, aims to wipe the State of the Jews off the map and treats Iranian Jews as second-class citizens.

This is a far cry from Azeri realities.

Historically, except for a brief period when Nadir Shah of Iran ruled the area and under the Soviet occupation, antisemitism has been a foreign concept in Azerbaijan. The country's Tourism Attaché to Israel, Jamilya Talibzadeh, claims that even under Soviet rule, Azerbaijan's national leader, Heydar Aliyev, opposed Soviet desires to destroy matza-making machines.

Unlike in Europe and America, synagogues in Azerbaijan have no security, and their doors remain unlocked even at night. There is no reason to fear thieves, let alone antisemitic bigots. Jewish men can proudly walk in the streets of Baku wearing a kippah (or a Star of David necklace) without the risk of being attacked. Jews who have come to think of Shiite Islam as an enemy should keep in mind the existence of a secular Shiite nation where Jewish life is welcomed and protected, and where Israel finds a trusted friend.

# Notes from the Emirates

## *Tolerance is the New Creed. What Does it Mean?*

April 2023

**Uriya Shavit**

The reading of the Megillah took place in a private villa, without any exterior Jewish symbols, in a quiet residential area of Dubai. Several dozen men and women were present, most French Jews of North African extraction who have made the United Arab Emirates their home for business.

When the reading ended, a generous and delicious catered meal followed, with jubilant music in the background. Then some dancing. The mood was festive but reserved.

The opening of an official synagogue, so I was told, is not allowed by the government for fear of Islamist terror. The demand is anyhow limited. As many as 2,000 Jews live in Dubai, but most are secular or traditionalist.

I have visited a great number of small Jewish communities across the world – if “communities” is indeed the correct word – and they all seem to face the same problem: the majority is not Orthodox, yet an Orthodox house of prayer is the main, and in some cases the only, public space that brings the local Jews together.

Some of those present did not command the Hebrew necessary to appreciate one of the most accessible and tricky biblical texts. Still, certain texts have the capacity to bring people together and enchant them even if they do not understand a word.

More than two years into the Abraham Accords, the mystery remains: Why did a small and vulnerable Arab state decide to lead a revolutionary approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict?

A week in the Emirates, including meetings with low-ranking officials, offered two explanations. The UAE made tolerance its national project, a guiding principle. Its strategic decision is to be on good terms with everybody. Everybody includes Israel, just as it includes Iran.

The other national project is defiance. Defiance of the desert, defiance of the climate, defiance of conventional wisdoms. They made peace with Israel for the same reason they built the gratuitous yet beautiful Burj Khalifa: because they can, and because they want the world to know that they can.

I asked one official whether the relations between our countries would withstand anything. For example, what if Israel annexed the West Bank? He responded that the agreement was signed between states, not between governments, and nothing can break it.

Perhaps he was overly-optimistic.

Ahmad Obaid Al Mansoori (as the spelling on his card reads) is an unusual person. He is a businessman, collector, and the founder of the Crossroads of Civilizations Museum in Dubai.

The small museum, a one-man project, includes a magnificent gallery rich with Islamic books and artifacts and an equally impressive gallery exhibiting pearls and how their trade shaped the region.

It also includes the first exhibition in the Arab world on the history of the Holocaust and antisemitism. Dr. Ofir Winter of the INSS published an early analysis of this milestone in our For a Righteous Cause Report for 2022.

Along with elaborate chronologies and moving documents, the exhibition gives special attention to Muslims who were Righteous among the Nations. Al Mansoori told me he believed the history of the Holocaust should be conveyed through the stories of heroes who fought evil.

In its almost two years of existence, some 6,000 people have visited the exhibition. According to Al Mansoori, the Arab ones, who were around half the visitors, were primarily schoolchildren. The visitor's book included almost only comments from Israelis: some emotional, some patronizing.

At noon, Al Mansoori drove to a research project competition at the local American international school. High school students prepared visual and audio displays on a range of genocides – from Bosnia and Rwanda to the Holocaust.

Al Mansoori served as one of three referees and took the job very seriously. I don't know who won, but I am happy to report there are still places where teenagers address grownups they meet for the first time as "Sir."

Is it right to teach the history of the Holocaust in the context of other genocides, as is often done in the West today? This depends on whether the differences, rather than just the similarities, are also highlighted. For Al Mansoori, the exceptionality of the crimes committed by the Nazis and their allies against the Jews is obvious.

The combination of his eclectic collection and his conformist yet audacious spirit makes Al Mansoori somewhat of a Victorian figure. He explained that all his life, he liked to follow his heart and break through walls, no matter what people said.

At my inefficient hotel in Dubai, the Arabian Courtyard, there is a pub dedicated to my hero, Sherlock Holmes, with posters and memorabilia. I launched an investigation. The pub was opened 18 years ago by the general manager of the hotel, a Pakistani and an admirer of the great detective. My private collection is now enriched by a glass engraving of Holmes with the mark, Fahidi Street, Dubai.

The Emiratis are at their best when they celebrate what their country is – a lively, generous, embracing, and benevolent despotic meeting point of traditions where money is not an issue.

I entered the Abu Dhabi Louvre galleries and was surprised to see how clever and fascinating the exhibitions that explore cultural exchanges and universal patterns are. On top of that, where else can a person stand almost alone for fifteen minutes in front of a Da Vinci?

Where the Emiratis try to exhibit something they are not, they fail. They are not a scientific powerhouse, let alone independent innovators, so the Dubai Future Museum – intended as a celebration of what science and technology are about to bring – feels embarrassingly outdated and fails to inspire.

The latest contribution to the local tolerance discourse is the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi. The complex hosts a mosque, church, synagogue, and an exhibition on the commonalities of the three monotheistic religions. It stands out as the clearest demonstration of the regime's commitment to preach and advance a moderate version of Islam.

Since it opened, the venue has been particularly popular with Israeli tourists. At least, so I overheard a guide tell William Hague, the former leader of the Conservative Party. If it wasn't Hague, then he must have a twin brother. If it was, then at 62, he finally looks his age.

It pains me to write this, but I was not impressed with the place. The concept of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Abrahamic religions is theologically challenging. The exhibition deals with the challenge through simplistic slogans that will, at best, satisfy those who could not care less.

Unlike the mosque, packed to the brim on Friday noon, the synagogue and the church were lifeless and empty, artificial constructs designed to make a point rather than to serve a public.

Our guide, a Moroccan, parroted in modern standard Arabic facts and commitments to tolerance and pluralism. I appreciated the words but could not ignore the music. The parroting reminded me of young Muslims I met and interviewed in radical mosques in Europe. I much prefer the parroting of peace slogans to the parroting of hostile slogans, but I could not avoid the feeling that if instructed otherwise, the guide would replace one for the other. Pluralism is only meaningful where people think for themselves.



# Word on the Contributors

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