

Israel's Defensive War—and Ours: A Call to Action Against Jew-Hatred

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In his explanation of the very first word of the Torah (*b'reishit*), the famed biblical commentator Rashi offered a defense of the Jewish people's right to the Land of Israel.

Rashi lived in the 11th century in France. He knew nothing of the State of Israel or the '67 borders or the settlements or Benjamin Netanyahu.

But he did witness one of the greatest tragedies in Jewish history: the First Crusade of 1096, during which terrorists bearing the sign of the cross, urged on by the pope to "liberate" the Holy Land from its occupiers, massacred countless Jews in the region of Europe known as Ashkenaz.

Some scholars say it was probably the pope's demagoguery that prompted Rashi to defend the Jewish people's right to the Land against those who would claim we "stole" it from the original Canaanite inhabitants.¹

In an eerie way, this first statement of Rashi's Torah commentary anticipates what happened last Shabbat, when terrorists slaughtered more than 1,000 Israeli Jews in the most medieval, pernicious, and vile manners—beheading babies, burning families in their homes, raping and murdering civilians indiscriminately in a maniacal, bloodthirsty rampage.

When the Hamas terrorists burst through Israel's defensive wall and breached Israeli airspace on supercharged hang gliders and massacred hundreds of Israelis attending a concert, they committed an unambiguous act of aggression against the Jewish state.

And *any* country—whether it's Israel, the United States, Ukraine, or any other—has the right to fight back against *any* enemy who commits aggression against them, let alone one so monstrous as Hamas.

International law² and Jewish law³ agree on this point: that a war of self-defense is both justified and just. So does common sense.

The IDF (Israeli Defense Forces)—which, unlike Hamas, has strict concern for morality, ethics, human dignity, and regard for civilians written into its military code—will, of course, carry out a defensive war to ensure that no one can ever do this to Israel again. And I, for one, support them fully and unreservedly in doing so.

Destruction and loss of innocent life is inevitable, of course—not because we want that, but because it is the nature of war.

I fear that we will be grieving for a long time. It is so tragic what these terrorists have wrought on us, on their own people, and on the world.

All this you know.

So, I'm here to tell you tonight something you don't know. Or, rather: something that you might *prefer not* to know, because it is so intensely personal.

And that is the vile antisemitism that we have seen here in our country and around the world since last weekend—and where it's coming from.

(Actually, I think the term "antisemitism" has become too euphemistic and lost some of its force. So, let me rephrase it.)

We should call it "Jew hatred": the hatred of Jewish people for no other reason than because we are Jews. Full stop.

And make no mistake about it: What we have been seeing this week—from the anti-Israel rants and harassment of Jewish students on elite college campuses, to the Australian demonstrators chanting "gas the Jews," to the crazed, tire-screaming motorist brandishing a Palestinian flag in the middle of the Long Island Expressway—is *pure Jew hatred*.

Much like the call to liberate the Holy Land was an excuse for the Crusaders to rape and pillage and murder the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz, today the cause of liberating the Palestinians is an excuse for people who hate Jews to proclaim it openly—and to do so, perversely, under the banner of "justice."

This is the part I think we've been willfully blind to for so long: that the Jew hatred we are seeing this week is not coming from white supremacists or Trump supporters or any of the usual bogeymen.

It's coming from people we in the Jewish community generally think of as *friends*.

In the early years after the Holocaust, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that "many anti-Semites—the majority perhaps—belong to the lower-middle class of the towns; they are functionaries, office workers, small businessmen, who possess nothing. ... [I]n representing the Jew as a robber, they put themselves in the enviable position of people who could be robbed."⁴

Our modern American version of this is the "angry white man." We've been taught to fear him, and demonize him, and ridicule him for his backward culture.

And that's easy to do because (a) some of them do, in fact, hate Jews; and (b) because, well, they're not *like us*: Generally speaking, most American Jews don't fit the typical profile of the angry white man.

But if Sartre's description was accurate in his time, our current fixation on the angry white man as the sole—or even primary—proponent of Jew hatred is woefully wrong.

The Jew hatred we are seeing this week is coming from people who, by many measures, are a lot *like us*: urban and suburban, highly educated, upwardly mobile, politically and culturally progressive, and supposedly committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- They're the college and law students who published articles and signed letters this week holding Israel solely responsible for the violence and expressing support and admiration for the Hamas attacks, apparently unbothered by the barbarity because they're doing it in the name of resistance.
- It's the Stanford University professor who reportedly forced his Jewish students to stand in the corner of the classroom, telling them that this is what Israel has done to the Palestinians and that the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis is dwarfed by the number of people killed by colonizers like Israel.⁵
- They're the organizations that force their employees to sit through hours and hours of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) training but never once include antisemitism in the curriculum because, after all, Jews are really oppressors.
- And they're the leaders of Black Lives Matter Chicago, who emblazoned a silhouette of an actual Hamas paraglider on a placard with the slogan "I stand with Palestine"—clearly caring not at all about the atrocities that very paraglider committed when he landed.

And these are all people who present themselves as caring about human dignity! What a farce!

But then again, no one should ever think that Jew hatred is rational.

Sartre described it as "*a passion*"—a pathology that "enters the body from the mind."⁶

While "ordinarily hate and anger have a provocation," he says, "anti-Semitic passion could have no such character. It precedes the facts that are supposed to call it forth; it seeks them out to nourish itself upon them; it must even interpret them in a special way so that they may become truly offensive."⁷

In other words, their arguments about Israel are really just a pretext to *hate Jews*, and Hamas is their proxy.

And how do we know this? Simple: because they hated us and committed atrocities against us long before there even was a State of Israel. And they're doing it again now.

If we need evidence of how their passions drive Jew-haters to delusion, consider the ironies highlighted so poignantly today by the columnist Nellie Bowles:

"The obvious new symbol for the Democratic Socialists of America is a Hamas soldier," she writes sarcastically in response to BLM Chicago's paraglider placard.

"Who would respect your pronouns more than a Hamas paraglider?"

"When I think of straight allies who support my gay rights and dignity, I obviously think of Hamas paragliders.

"This Is What a Feminist Looks Like (hint: It's a Hamas paraglider, dummy!) Strong, rebellious, and arriving with panache to do an ethnic cleansing of the Jews? The Hamas paraglider has it all. ..."

To put a fine point on this ridiculous irrationality, Bowles, who is gay, adds: "Yes, OK, they would kill me [and] parade [my body] through the streets, but that's not the point."⁸

I know this is taboo to say, but I believe it's my responsibility as a Jewish leader to say it:

It's too easy for us to focus on the angry white men and minimize or dismiss Jew hatred when it comes from people we identify with, people who are in so many ways *like us*, people whose causes we believe in—most of the time, anyway.

But that would be a grave mistake—one that could very well imperil our existence.

Because these students and young activists who are celebrating Hamas as heroes, they are our future lawyers, governors, legislators, diplomats, and opinion leaders.

So, we better do something to change the direction they're headed in, and we better do it *now*.

One thing you can do is respond to the email we sent out today and message the governor and your state legislators to advocate for robust Holocaust education in New York schools.

Another thing you can do is come listen to our ADL (Anti-Defamation League) speaker at TBE on Sunday, October 29, and learn more about how you can help combat Jew hatred in our community.

Do something—anything—but don't sit on the sidelines. This is a defensive war, and we're obligated to fight it.

In the meantime, our prayers and our hearts are with the people of Israel, who are suffering so terribly.

When the chief rabbis of the new State of Israel wrote the *Avinu She-Bashamayim* prayer in 1948, they believed that, despite all the hardships the Jewish people had endured to get there, the Torah guarantees that there would not be a third destruction in the Land of Israel.⁹

I'm not so sure.

Israel is strong and its cause is just, but there are so many Jew haters out there, and if they continue to be successful at influencing public opinion, it could significantly undermine Israel's legitimacy in the eyes of the world.

So, I invite us all now to pray for the State of Israel—its leaders, its soldiers, its people—that they will know safety, security, success, and, God willing one day, peace in the Land.

1 See Harvey Sicherman and Gilad J. Gevaryahu, "Rashi and the First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy, Legend," *Judaism* (Spring 1999), 2-3, <http://www.gevaryahu.com/Rashi%20and%20the%20First%20CrusadeWP.pdf>

2 See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 61

3 See Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 45b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *M'lakhim* 5:1

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 25

5 See Tom Porter, "Stanford suspends lecturer accused of making Jewish students stand in a corner and calling Israelis 'colonizers,'" https://www.businessinsider.com/stanford-lecturer-suspended-made-jewish-students-stand-in-corner-report-2023-10?fbclid=IwAR3HL_YN_e_pO2LLrisAuJBqFw2hlcphv07s1yjdgZavrmTWiEaHevZOls

6 Sartre, 10, 11

7 Ibid., 17

8 Nellie Bowles, "TGIF: Hot Takes on Terrorism," *The Free Press*, <https://www.thefp.com/p/tgif-hot-takes-on-hamas-terrorism>

9 See Rabbi Haim Jachter, "The Great Reishit Tzemichat Geulatenu Debate," <https://jewishlink.news/the-great-reishit-tzemichat-geulatenu-debate/>