

Kristallnacht Could Happen Here

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On November 9, 1938—85 years ago this week—the Nazi government and citizen collaborators destroyed synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses, storefronts, residences, and property throughout Germany, murdering hundreds and injuring countless more in a rampage of hate.

We remember this terror attack against the Jews of Germany by the name Kristallnacht, a German word meaning Crystal Night.

But that name obscures the horror and evil that were perpetrated that night. In reality, it was a violent, barbaric, rage-filled pogrom.

The Nazis themselves were quite clear about what their aims were: They called it, *Die Aktion gegen die Juden*, The Action against the Jews.

Here's how the Nazi Security Service, the SD, described it in their official report:

"The foundations of Jewish life and their internal organization were completely altered as a result of the operation mounted against Jewry in all parts of the Reich. ...

"In general the operation took the form of destruction or burning of synagogues, and the destruction of almost all Jewish shops, which were thereby forced to discontinue business. ...

"At the same time, in order to intensify the pressure on emigration, 25,000 Jewish men were brought to concentration camps, in some cases temporarily. ...

"Hence, in conclusion," says the report, "it can be stated that Jewry...has finally been removed from all areas of life of the German people, and Jews, therefore, have only one way to insure their continued existence, and that is emigration."¹

Bottom line: We don't want Jews here. If they want to stay alive, it's simple: All they need to do is leave.

Our parashah this week begins with the death of our matriarch Sarah.

The place where they lived at the time was ruled by the Hittites.

So, Abraham goes to some local Hittite landowners and asks them: "Sell me a burial site among you, so that I may bury my deceased wife there." (*Gen. 23:4*)

The Hittites say, in essence: "Abraham, we love you here in Hittite Land. We'll be happy to give you a gravesite for Sarah at no charge."

But Abraham politely declines the offer.

"I am a resident alien among you," he says.

As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch understands it, what Abraham meant by this was, "I have no rights in your land, but I have lived among you for a long time."²

Hirsch was a rabbi in Germany. He died in 1888, more than four decades before Hitler came to power. But his words were prescient.

By the time of the November 1938 pogrom, the Nazi government had already stripped the Jews of their German citizenship.³

Although they had lived and even thrived in Germany for a long time, they now had no rights. They were "resident aliens," subject to the whims of a hostile state.

And then, a most vile and wicked act of what we now call "gaslighting":

Having just committed the pogrom against the Jews, the Nazi regime turned right around and blamed the Jews for it, declaring that "The hostile attitude of Jewry toward the German nation and Reich, an attitude which does not even shrink from cowardly murder, demands determined resistance and severe punishment."⁴

And they imposed what they called "a payment of atonement of one billion Reichsmarks" on the Jewish community.⁵

Just to be clear, this meant that the *Jews* were held responsible and punished for an attack perpetrated *against them* by people who wanted the Jews to leave the country.

The parallel with the current moment is obvious: Hamas carries out a bloodthirsty, barbaric pogrom against the Jewish people—burning people, beheading babies, massacring families, and taking them hostage—and then the perpetrators, and far too many around the world and right here in America, blame the *Jews* for it!!

What does that poem in *Mishkan T'filah* say? "What happened once upon a time happens all the time."

People keep asking me—and I wonder myself—what on earth is going on. How can any American possibly sympathize with Hamas? How can anyone excuse the gruesome, cruel, inhuman acts they committed?

It's completely irrational, completely delusional. It goes against everything they supposedly stand for.

They call Israel an "oppressor" and a "colonizer"? They accuse Israel of "genocide"?

Do these people know *anything*? Didn't they learn about the Holocaust? Don't they know about the Taliban and 9/11? Do they have any *clue* what they're rooting for?

Yesterday, I saw a large and very loud pro-Palestinian parade making its way down 34th Street in Manhattan past Macy's.

Is this *really* happening in the *United States*?

As my friend and colleague Rabbi Seth Limmer asked in a *Chicago Tribune* op-ed yesterday, "**Will Americans see a Kristallnacht happen here?**"

I am sad to say it, but I think we could. Maybe not right now, but at a time that may not be too far off.

Jew hatred has been gaining traction in America for a number of years now, and it's reached a fevered pitch in the last month.

What worries me is that, at this point, it's no longer confined to the extreme margins. True, it's not quite mainstream yet, but it's getting there.

I believe that time will come when the students who are celebrating Hamas and threatening Jews on Ivy League campuses and ripping down posters of Israeli hostages in the West Village come into their own as members of America's ruling class.

What concerns me most is that these students are our soon-to-be congressmen, senators, attorneys, bankers, educators, diplomats, and policymakers.

In my estimation, the bipartisan consensus in support of Israel has broken down. A small but vocal, and not un-influential, segment of the U.S. Congress is openly anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian, and, perhaps at their less-guarded moments, explicitly antisemitic.

The matriculation of those who are openly anti-Israel from university campuses into the elite strata of American political, economic, and cultural power will put enormous ideological pressure on our prevailing norms and values—and in time, the already strained consensus that undergirds our society will collapse.

I fear that America today is kind of like France in the middle part of the 18th century, and President Biden is our Louis XV—the last of the old-American guard that celebrated freedom and democracy and modernity and instinctively backed Israel as an embodiment of those values.

Famously, Louis XV is reported to have said, "*Après moi, le deluge*—After me, the flood."

I think America stands on the brink of its own raging flood, with populism gaining strength on the right and wokeism gaining strength on the left. Each brings with it its own brand of antisemitism, and I am concerned that we, the Jews, will be caught in the middle when the dam breaks.

I know I am painting a bleak picture. But in essence, it's what Theodor Herzl predicted when he first called for a sovereign Jewish state in the 19th century.

He wrote in 1896: "The Jewish Question still exists. It would be foolish to deny it. It exists wherever Jews live in perceptible numbers. Where it does not yet exist, it will be brought by Jews in the course of their migrations.

"We naturally move to those places where we are not persecuted, and there our presence soon produces persecution. This is true in every country, and will remain true even in those most highly civilized...till the Jewish Question finds a solution on a political basis."⁶

Herzl knew that this is why we needed an Israel in his time, and it's why we need Israel now.

It's why we need to support *Israelis*, even if we have no connection to them personally. Because just by *living* in Israel, let alone risking their lives to defend it, every single one of them is doing something *invaluable* for the Jewish people:

They are ensuring that there will be a place we can go if things here turn on a dime.

And Germany showed us that things *can* turn on a dime: No matter how long we've lived here, no matter how much they've said they like us, we could find ourselves one day with "no rights in this land."

October 7 was particularly scary because Hamas carried out its pogrom inside the boundaries of Israel itself, the one place on earth where the Jewish people are supposed to be safe.

I am confident that the Israeli government and defense complex are strong enough and smart enough to protect their citizens and to fix whatever needs to be fixed in the country's defenses to prevent something on this scale from happening again—just like the United States has since 9/11, thank God.

I am far *less* confident, and far more *concerned*, about what will happen here in America.

In my view, antisemitism in *all* its forms—right wing *and* left wing, from replacement theory to anti-Zionism—needs to be the top political and social concern of American Jews for the foreseeable future.

It is our responsibility to do everything we can to prevent a Kristallnacht from happening here.

¹ "Security Service Report on the Kristallnacht: The Operation Against the Jews (November 9-10, 1938), In: Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World*, 653-654

² R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Gen.* 23:4

³ Via the Reich Citizenship Law of 1935

⁴ H.W. Goering, "Decree Regarding Atonement Fine of Jewish State Subjects (November 12, 1938), In: Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, 653

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Theodor Herzl, "A Solution to the Jewish Question (1896)," In: Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, 534