

Pro-Hamas Encampments & Our Long Night of Foolishness

A Meditation on the *Song of Songs*

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It is traditional to read the *Song of Songs* on the Shabbat of Pesach.

In our recent Tuesday night adult education course, we studied classical and modern interpretations of the *Song of Songs*, and we learned that Jewish tradition has always read it as an allegory about the Jewish people's longing for God. We also learned how, in every generation, Jewish interpreters have drawn on the wisdom of earlier readers to apply the *Song of Songs* to the realities of the present.

So, tonight, instead of a conventional sermon, I want to offer a modern, post-October 7 interpretation of the opening verses of Chapter 3 of the *Song of Songs*.

Upon my couch at night
I sought the one I love—
I sought, but found him not.
"I must rise and roam the town,
Through the streets and through the squares;
I must seek the one I love."
I sought but found him not.
I met the watchmen
Who patrol the town.
"Have you seen the one I love?"
Scarcely had I passed them
When I found the one I love.
I held him fast, I would not let him go.

—*Song of Songs* 3:1-4a

For Jews throughout history, the "couch" at the beginning of this passage was a "bed of suffering."¹ But that's not *my* experience. I am quite comfortable and safe in my upper middle-class suburban life.

As an American Jew, I am privileged beyond my ancestors' wildest imaginations. I am free to live and work wherever I please. Anti-Jewish restrictions and quotas are a thing of the past. My children can attend whatever college their grades will get them into.

We are free to socialize with whomever we like, we can join pretty much any organization we want, and we can marry whomever we choose.

In fact, Jews have become so accepted in American society that non-Jews are lining up to marry us, and more than 70 percent of our young people are doing so. That's up from just five percent in the 1950s²—a clear indication of how completely we have been embraced by non-Jewish America.

Most of us have rarely, if ever, encountered antisemitism or discrimination. That is, until recently.

Night after night since October 7, I have sat “upon my” comfortable, fluffy “couch” in my living room watching the news on TV—and I’m shocked and aghast at what I see.

College kids cheering on Hamas? Aren’t they the terrorists who slaughtered Israelis at that music festival and killed kids in their beds and raped Jewish women and took hundreds of innocent people hostage—and then called their parents to brag about it?

Jewish students being harassed, blockaded, and assaulted at Yale? Columbia University moving classes online because it can’t promise that Jewish students and professors will be safe walking on campus?

What in God’s name is happening in America? This has *not* been my experience.

I sit “upon my couch at night” in my living room and see all this playing out on TV, and it feels so incongruent, so surreal. I knew stuff like this happened in Europe. But *here*?

“**N**ight” has long been a metaphor for a prolonged time of anxiety, fear, exile, and despair. Like when God turned away from us after we worshipped the golden calf.³ And when evil people used their God-given free will to torture and murder Jewish people in the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust.

Well, if that’s what night is, then we American Jews have been living in the light of day for a long time, especially since the end of World War II. Historians called it “the golden age” of American Jewry.

But now, many agree: The golden age is over.⁴ Yes, when people in the East Village are ripping down posters of Israeli families and babies taken hostage by Hamas, and protestors at Cooper Union are barricading Jewish students in the library, and a pro-Hamas tent-city has literally “occupied” the central public space of Columbia University, it is evident that the golden age is over.

We all thought it was permanent, that golden age. The early immigrants who dreamed of a better life called America “the golden *medinah*.” For them, it promised freedom and opportunity, a place where they could thrive as Jews *and* as citizens.

And America delivered on that promise. We thought we’d reached the end of history.

But maybe it was an illusion. Maybe the golden age was just an interlude, like the time between the destruction of the two Temples and the period in Spain between the Muslim conquest and the Christian Reconquista. Come to think of it, they called that one the “golden age,” too.

“I sought the one I love.” The rabbis say this verse is about the Jewish people seeking God. For medieval philosophers like Maimonides, God was a synonym for perfect knowledge, and the

pathway to that knowledge was *reason*. For them, to search for God meant to use your intellect to think rationally about the world.

But, today, rational thinking appears to have gone out of style. To borrow a phrase from Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, we are now enveloped in "the darkness of foolishness."⁵

Supposedly educated people saying things like " Hamas, we love you/and we love your rockets, too" is foolishness.

College students chanting "death to America," while Uncle Sam forgives their student loans? Foolishness.

Agitating for the victory of Islamist terrorists without a clue that the U.S. is their next target? Utter foolishness.

But, then, should we really be surprised, when elite universities have prioritized ideology and politics above serious intellectual inquiry?

When an Israeli professor is denied entry to the campus where he works while a Hamas-loving encampment is allowed to thrive there, you know things have gone awry.

So, I thought to myself: *"I must rise and roam the town, through the streets and through the squares. I must seek the one I love."*

As someone who values knowledge and reason, I refuse to lose myself in this long night of foolishness, a world where up is down and down is up— and reality is turned on its head.

I cannot accept this reductionist idea that if you plug factors like race, wealth, and power into a simple ideological algorithm, it will tell you who the good guys are and who the bad guys are.

And I refuse to profess the orthodoxy it demands: that Israel is evil just because its leaders are white and they have a strong military and a thriving economy, while Hamas is morally good simply because they are people of color, and their economy is in shambles, and they use paragliders instead of airplanes to attack innocent civilians.

Basic reason exposes the flaws in this nefarious logic.

And yet, like the Inquisitors of medieval Spain, they pressure me to affirm a creed I know is false— and they threaten my livelihood and my *life* if I don't. But I will not give in.⁶

Still, this is the new wisdom of our age, the natural consequence of a twisted ideology they strangely call "progressive." So, no matter how "I sought" to convince people that this worldview is irrational and harmful; no matter how vigorously I searched for someone who would be persuaded by reason, "I found him not."

"I met the watchmen who patrol the town." These are the pro-Hamas agitators who are encamped on the quad and blockade Jewish students who want to pass.

They are the university presidents who are supposed to keep their campuses and their students safe but have failed to do so.

And it's no wonder, because when they testified before Congress, they couldn't even say that calling for the destruction of the Jewish state is antisemitism.

They fiercely condemn maladies like racism, homophobia, and transphobia, but they stand idly by while their Jewish students are taunted with threats like "seventh of October is about to be every day for you!"⁷

As Columbia professor Shai Davidai, an Israeli, put it this week, "If this was the KKK, if this was the Proud Boys, if this was...the West[boro] Baptist Church that hates homosexuals...the last six months would have played out very, very differently.

"The university knows how to deal with hate speech. It knows how to deal with student groups that terrorize other student groups. How do we know this? Because that's what they've done in the past.
...

"When Columbia wants to deal with hate, it knows how. When it doesn't, this is what we see now. And it doesn't because it focuses on one specific group, and we know what that group is now: It's the Jews."⁸

So, when I asked them, "have you seen the one I love?"—have you thought about this rationally?—they spit in my face and continued to taunt me. In the tussle, one of them poked me in the eye with the butt of his Palestinian flagpole.⁹

"Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one I love." One thing has become clear in all this: So long as the people who espouse this warped worldview are in positions of power, reason will not prevail.

A whole generation has now been indoctrinated in it. Careers have now been built on it. So, the anti-Zionism and antisemitism aren't going away any time soon.

For now, this is our reality. To change it, we will have to undo what has been done, un-teach what has been taught.

It has been said that "ideas matter." Now we know it to be true.

The good news is that the world has confronted harmful ideas and ideologies before—like Nazism, communism, fascism, racism, and jihadism—and humanity has defeated them, or will defeat them.

I have faith that we will defeat the harmful ideas of our time, too.

And when we do—when we finally pass the watchmen—I believe that reason and truth will be restored to the world. And when it is, we will “hold him fast and not let him go.”

1 R. Joseph ibn Yahya, commentary to *Song of Songs* 3:1

2 See David Ellenson, *After Emancipation*

3 See Targum, *Song of Songs* 3:1

4 R. David Ellenson expressed this to me in a conversation soon after Jewish students at Cooper Union were forced to take refuge in the school library from anti-Israel protesters. More recently, Franklin Foer expressed a similar view in an article he wrote for *The Atlantic* entitled “The Golden Age of American Jews Is

Ending,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/us-anti-semitism-jewish-american-safety/677469/>

5 Ralbag, commentary to *Song of Songs* 3:1

6 See R. Joseph ibn Yahya (16th-century, Italy), commentary to *Song of Songs* 3:3: “The watchmen who patrol the town—these are the nations of the world, who guard and patrol this world...and speak to me about their laws in order to bring me into their people and their religion.”

7 As quoted in *The Jerusalem Post*, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-798049#google_vignette

8 As stated in an interview with “The Dispatch Podcast,” Wednesday, April 24, 2024

9 See Sahar Tartak, “I Was Stabbed in the Eye at Yale,” *The Free Press*, https://www.thefp.com/p/i-was-stabbed-in-the-eye-at-yale?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email&fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR1elgQiybcFU1BkmlQRJGKIPaYMAVHNYDg5GAeZutm1iLUx180WKICmkYY_aem_AUn44LQEJHmn1j4m8XvigLISclNrg3a-G4iaaISMofDgxPGNEhKpMFzR-mmWXSmyNd4QBsl0LyifYTYDU05jhy_C