Be a Jew
Rabbi A. Brian Stoller
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In reaction to the murder of Sarah Milgrim and Yaron Lischinsky Wednesday night in Washinton, DC, the podcaster John Podhoretz said yesterday: "It doesn't matter if a Jew is left wing or right wing. It doesn't matter if a Jew is trying to get food into Gaza or wants to kill every last Palestinian. The people who are engaged in acts of violent resistance against the existence of Jewry in Israel will shoot you no matter who you are. Shoot you in the back of the head. … Jews in America better get right with this fact."[1]

It is a grim and cutting reality: shocking, yes, but also predictable given the antisemitic venom that's been spewed since October 7th.

It started with the college encampments, the flyers glorifying Hamas paragliders, the "peace activists" tearing down posters of Israeli hostages in the West Village.

"We don't hate Jews," they claimed. "We are against what Israel is doing in Gaza."

But their actions and their rhetoric revealed the absurdity of that claim, even back then.

Today, after the murder of Sarah and Yaron, the lie is utterly exposed and laid bare for everyone to see.

As my colleague Rabbi Joseph Meszler put it in a profound Facebook post today, "the overwhelming majority of anti-Zionism today is antisemitic. Anti-Zionism, singling out Israel as the Jew among the nations, is today's main form of antisemitism."

We know this because the protestors and the harassers, like the murderer in DC, are not targeting the Israeli government or Israeli soldiers or even Israelis specifically; they are targeting *Jews*: American Jews who have no role whatsoever in the policies of the Israeli government or in fighting the war.

Parashat B'chukotai, the second half of this week's double Torah portion, sets forth the basic rule, one we learn from earliest childhood, that our actions have consequences. If you follow the rules and do what is right, you will be rewarded; if you break the rules and act unjustly, you will be punished.

But antisemitism has always defied that basic rule. Sartre described antisemitism as a pathology of sorts—what he called "a passion."[2]

"[O]rdinarily," he says, "hate and anger have a *provocation*: I hate someone who has made me suffer, someone who contemns or insults me. [But] anti-Semitic passion," he explains, "precedes the facts that are supposed to call it forth… it must even interpret them in a special way so that

they may become truly offensive."[3] The antisemite, Sartre says, "seeks in historical events the signs of the presence of an evil power," and that evil power is the Jew.

Sarah Milgrim and Yaron Lischinsky worked for the Israeli embassy, yes, but as far as we know, the man who murdered them did not know that. All he knew (or thought he knew) was that they were Jews, and that's why he killed them.

Therefore, it is a fallacy to characterize Sarah and Yaron's murder as a consequence of Israel's policies in Gaza. Their murder is not the same, for example, as the murder of the United Healthcare CEO, Brian Thompson. Sarah and Yaron were murdered not because of what they *did*, but because of who they *were*. That is the definition of antisemitism.

This tragedy proves what the Jewish political theorist Michael Walzer writes in his introduction to Sartre's book: "[I]t is as a Jew (and a member of the Jewish nation) that the Jew is perceived by others, and this is an identity that he cannot escape—more accurately, that he is not allowed to escape."[4]

Given this reality, the only response I can think of to this tragedy—and to post-October 7th Jew-hatred generally—is, as my friend and colleague Rabbi David Spinrad said, to "be a Jew." Embrace our Jewishness; embrace Judaism.

This is what the Jews of Germany did in the 1930s. Marginalized and disenfranchised from German life because they were Jews, the Jewish community established an organization called the "Kulturbund" to foster and support Jewish culture and education. Among the Kulturbund's core aims were to help Germany's highly assimilated Jews rediscover the beauty of their tradition and, in the words of Berlin Rabbi Joachim Prinz, "make them Jews again."[5]

During this period, the Kulturbund provided a robust Jewish cultural life for the community, including theater, opera, orchestra concerts, poetry readings, art exhibits, youth and children's theater, cabaret, cinema, phonograph recordings, and book publishing.[6] Synagogue attendance increased. Jewish youth movements and education flourished.

As historian Michael Meyer explains, huge numbers of German Jews who were non-practicing in any way and saw themselves as thoroughly German were "eager to know why they were Jews." Adult education "became the principal focus of this generation's efforts to reclaim Jewish knowledge,"[7] and "unprecedented numbers" of people attended lectures on Judaism.

Ironically, the Nazis' persecution of the Jews in the 1930s led, for a time, to a kind of renaissance of Jewish life in very dark times.

I think we should strive for the same today. We cannot control the rising antisemitism in our country, but we can control how we respond to it.

Our aim at Temple Beth-El is to create a robust, 21st-century pluralistic Jewish experience for all who seek it. That includes worship infused with the joy of music. It includes rich cultural arts programs and challenging adult learning opportunities.

Now is a great time to take advantage of these things. Now is the time to find your Jewish practice or pathway. Wear a Jewish star; wear a kippah; come to the daily minyan; take on a Shabbat practice; study Torah.

Now is the time to "be a Jew."

May the memories of Sarah and Yaron always be for a blessing, and may they inspire us to love Jewish life as much as they did.

[1] "The Commentary Magazine Podcast," May 22, 2025
[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 10
[3] Ibid., 17
[4] Michael Walzer, Introduction to Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, xii
[5] Quoted in Michael Meyer, *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, 289
[6] See ibid., 285
[7] Ibid., 293