

The Hacking of Jewish History

Rabbi Hal B. Schevitz

Kol Nidre

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At 8:00 in the morning on October 7, 2023, Rami Davidian received a phone call. It was a friend asking him to rescue his son from something bad that was happening at an all-night music festival a few miles away from Rami's home. Rami lives in Moshav Patish, and delivers fuel to farmers in southern Israel for a living, with an intimate knowledge of the roads and terrain of the area. His house is 6 miles from Re'im, the location of the Nova Festival, and without hesitation, Rami got in his truck and made the short drive. As he was approaching the site of the festival, he saw people fleeing in a stampede, running as fast as they could to get away in any direction. Rami tried to speak to as many as he could, telling them where to go, what landmarks to look for, what valleys or rocks or roads to stand by until others came to take them away by car.

When Rami got in touch with his friend's son, they located each other by playing the children's game "hotter/colder" with locations and geography in the area. After finding each other, the young man and his friends from the party all crammed into Rami's pickup truck as he whisked them away to safety. In the next few minutes, Rami's phone filled up with hundreds of texts and What's App messages. The people he rescued shared his cell number with other party-goers trying to flee. After dropping off that first truck-load of people, Rami sped back to Re'im. He texted and called his own friends and sons-in-law to help him evacuate the area, as these civilians became an ad-hoc first responder unit, getting people out, all while under fire from Hamas terrorists.

Many of Rami's rescues were particularly daring. On one occasion, a young woman was stuck in a wadi in the middle of nowhere, with little cell phone reception, surrounded by rugged terrain. She was crying over the phone to Rami, begging him to save her. Rami said to her, "I'll begin honking my horn, and the louder it gets, you direct me." He managed to get close to her, but found her surrounded by 6 armed men, and realized that they were terrorists. Thinking quickly, Rami used his knowledge of Arabic. He said to the terrorists, "I'm also an Arab. A

Muslim. My name is Abu Rami. The IDF will be here soon, and they are going to kill us, me and you. Let me have the girl because she will slow you down.” They believed Rami and gave him the girl, and he sped off with her in his truck.

Rami Davidian spent 36 hours rescuing people from the Nova Festival near Re’im. When all of the party-goers had been evacuated, he returned to gather and match body parts, cover corpses, and move bodies out of the way of Israeli tanks. Rami recited the Sh’ma over each one he encountered. All told, Rami Davidian saved over 750 people from the massacre at the Nova Festival, and fulfilled two of the most important mitzvot in Jewish tradition: *pikuaḥ nefesh*, saving a life, and *kavod ha-met*, honoring the dead. He has become a national hero, and was chosen to light a torch at the national Independence Day ceremony on Mount Herzl earlier this year.

In a very real sense, one of the basic premises of Zionism failed on October 7. Israel was created to be a safe haven for the Jewish People, with an army to protect and defend the Jews. For approximately 48 hours, the borders of the State of Israel, and its military deterrence, ceased to exist. However, in another sense, Zionism proved that it was alive and well. While Rami’s story stands out among many others, he is only one of thousands of individual Israelis who took action on October 7. Some rescued those under attack. Some grabbed their personal weapons and took the fight to the terrorists. Some put on their uniforms and drove miles to front. Where the government and the IDF failed, the citizens of Israel mobilized and took the burden of the defense of the Jewish State upon themselves.

Zionism is the movement to build a sovereign state of the Jewish People in our ancestral homeland. While the word itself is only about 130 years old, it is the articulation of the dreams of our people during our 2,000-year exile, and the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. In the pre-state era, and in the early years of the State of Israel, there were different ways to understand how that would be practically implemented, but the basic premise was a rescue operation for the world’s Jews.

Beyond saving actual Jewish lives, Zionism transformed the Jewish People. The early Zionists wanted to create a “New Jew,” a Jew who would be in touch with the land, who would build and farm and innovate, and more importantly, who would not be intimidated by external

threats or Antisemitism. They wanted to jettison the mindset of the passive, ghettoized, persecuted Jew in exile, and replace that with the confident, brave Jew, who would stand up to those who would do us harm, grounded in the stories of King David and the Maccabees, who also lived in and defended the land of Israel.

A microcosm of this transformation can be seen in the following story. We all remember the “Unite the Right” Rally of White Nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia from August of 2017. Not long after the rally, Rabbi Daniel Gordis, a teacher and founder of Shalem College in Jerusalem, showed his students a video of the march and interviews with some of the participants. The Israeli students were stunned as they saw the parade of the torches, and were in disbelief that the men with flak jackets, helmets, and semiautomatic weapons were the protesters, not the police. They were shocked when Nazi flags appeared onscreen. But, when one marcher said that he wanted to kill Jews, the students burst into laughter.

Rabbi Gordis, taken aback, paused the video, and asked them what they found so amusing. One student said, “does this guy believe that in today’s world you can just go out and kill Jews?” Gordis explored the reasons behind their laughter. These young Israelis, all who had recently finished their military service, had been raised in an entirely different culture than Jews just a few generations before, one in which Jews had learned to put victimhood behind them. For these Jews, seventy years of Jewish sovereignty and strength eliminated 2,000 years of diaspora Jewish fear.

It is also why, in the days following October 7, thousands of Israelis from all across the globe went back to Israel, and hundreds of thousands re-enlisted in the IDF. They were proud and ready to defend their country.

To use modern lingo, and borrowing from computer terminology, Zionism hacked Jewish history. To hack something means to create a new way of solving a problem. Before Israel, Jewish life was precarious and constantly under threat. Governments of countries in which Jews lived, and non-Jewish neighbors, could always find a reason to persecute, attack, expel, or murder Jews. Our ancestors were right to live in a perpetual state of fear. But Zionism hacked the system. It created a solution to, what Europeans in the 19th and 20th centuries called, “the Jewish Problem,” not only by solving the geographical question of where Jews could

survive, but also the psychological question of how we would live amongst our fellow human beings and approach the world.

The Jewish experience of persecution is expressed in the Haggadah that we read at our Passover Seder: “In every generation, they rise up against us to destroy us, but the Holy Blessed One saves us from their hands.” This statement is from a pre-modern model: God will come to save us, just as God redeemed us from Egypt. Unfortunately, history would disagree with the authors of the Haggadah. An honest report card evaluating God’s rescue of the Jewish people from our oppressors during our 2,000-year exile would show some pretty abysmal grades. God does not have the best track record of saving Jews.

Zionism’s response to this condition was that Jews must do it ourselves. If the Jewish People want to change our state of exile and vulnerability, then we had to learn nation-building. And so, we built institutions of governance, agriculture, technology, and self-defense, transforming the very idea of Judaism’s priorities. Zionism changed the conditions of the Jewish People by taking ownership of our collective destiny so that we could defend ourselves, chart our own course, and have a seat at the table of the family of nations.

This dramatic change, this hacking of Jewish history, can best be contrasted by two iconic photographs depicting two different moments of what it meant to be a Jew. The first photo, taken in the Warsaw Ghetto, sometime in 1943, depicts a terrified young boy, his arms raised helplessly in the air, as a Nazi points a submachine gun in his direction. This boy is alone, powerless to do anything, with no one to help him.

The second photo is from June 7, 1967, taken by Israeli photographer David Rubinger, who snapped a shot of Tziyon Karasenti, Yitzhak Yifat, and Haim Oshri, three Israeli paratroopers, as they stood in front of the Western Wall, shortly after they had captured it from Jordan during the Six-Day War. Their heads are uncovered, as they look into the distance at something we cannot see. Their gaze is one of reverence and awe, as if they are taking in the enormity of the moment, that Jews were finally back in Jerusalem, our ancient capital. They are soldiers, but they do not crave conflict. We can see from their faces that they have achieved a peace, so longed for by the Jewish People. Although this peace did not last, this one moment, captured in time, expresses our yearning. The one detail that stands out most is that these

photographs were taken only 24 years apart. Such was the dramatic shift in the fortunes of the Jewish People because of Zionism.

This hacking of Jewish history did not just affect the Jews who lived in Israel. It also had ripple effects throughout the Diaspora. Israel's thriving became our thriving, instilling in American Jews greater pride and self-confidence. While Israel was and still is a sanctuary in times of trouble, it became an aspirational role model for many Jews who, even with all of the freedoms that America offered its citizens, still somehow felt that they had to keep a low profile. The establishment, resilience, and vitality of Israel gave us the green light to become more active in American life and more open in the defense of Jewish interests. The dramatic increase in Jewish participation in America that took place in the second half of the 20th century was directly due to American Jewish pride in the Zionist movement and the State of Israel.

In recent years, American Jews have drifted away from Israel for a number of reasons that include the demise of the peace process, Israel's rightward political drift, the wholehearted embrace of Israel by the American right, especially evangelicals, and Anti-Zionism in progressive spaces. Many of us didn't like to talk about Israel, and if we did, it came with a caveat: "I believe in Israel, but...."

All of that changed on October 7. Some described it as a pogrom, a reenactment of what it was like to be a Jew in a world without Israel. Except for the fact that it happened in Israel, where we were supposed to be safe. We had to confront some tough questions: Did Israel really change the trajectory of Jewish history? Are we just reliving the same patterns? And is it that much more painful because it is happening in Israel?

We were reminded by Rami Davidian, so many Israelis, and the overwhelming majority of the American Jewish community, and its supporting institutions, that Zionism still existed, and it had in fact changed us. As much as historical comparisons might help us make sense of our current situation, in truth, they no longer work, because we are literally living in an unprecedented moment in the history of the Jewish experience. In response to pogroms or massacres during previous times, Jews either succumbed to the attacks, fled the places where they were living, or assimilated. In response to October 7, Jews of all political and religious expressions came together, joined by those who are not Jewish but share our values, in order

to confront those who threaten us. Just as Israel organized itself to defend itself, we American Jews organized, raised our voices, and got to work. We are no longer the little boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. We are the paratroopers standing at the Wall, yearning for peace while also defending our people.

Even as we live in this new era, some American Jews carry elements of that pre-Zionist mentality. This was demonstrated by a television commercial from earlier this year, made, with the best of intentions, to combat Antisemitism. The ad portrayed a suburban Jewish mother and daughter leaving their house, only to see a swastika with the words “No Jews” spray-painted on the garage. The mother was noticeably and rightfully shaken. While the daughter asked what was on the garage, the mother dismissed her, hurried her into the car, and sped off. Upon their return, the mother discovered that the vandalism had been painted over by their non-Jewish neighbor, and exchanged a nod of appreciation with him. This ad was supposed to inspire allyship, how a non-Jewish neighbor recognized Jew-hatred and did something about it. I understood the motivation behind it, but it missed something crucial.

The commercial portrayed the response of a victimized Jew living in exile. I could understand her anger, frustration, and vulnerability about feeling violated, especially as a target of Antisemitism. However, because the Jewish woman fled and the non-Jewish neighbor took action, the commercial told us that we need a non-Jewish savior to rescue us from Antisemitism. Supporting Jews in the face of Antisemitism is an important message to communicate to all Americans, and we should welcome those who stand with us, but it should not come at the cost of our own dignity, agency, and ability to stand up for ourselves.

Notwithstanding the attitudes portrayed in this commercial, we have been emboldened by our Zionism to rise up and confront the many challenges of the past year. One of the biggest challenges of that we have faced is Anti-Zionism, the most modern manifestation of Antisemitism. Anti-Zionism is an existential threat because it means the destruction of the Jewish State, whether by demographic changes or by force. In reality, it is a greater threat to American Jews than it is to Israelis. As we have been reassured in recent weeks, the State of Israel isn't going anywhere. However, Anti-Zionism undermines the pride and self-confidence

that Israel gives to us Diaspora Jews, often putting conditions on our Jewish expression in public.

Understood rightly, Anti-Zionism is currently more of a threat than classical Antisemitism. Conspiracy theories about Jews with too much power who control the banks or the government are frustrating, disheartening, and challenging, and we must confront them. But these pale in comparison to those who seek to destroy the actual fulfillment of the dream that has sustained the Jewish People for the last 2,000 years. The true threat of Anti-Zionism is that it works to undo the most effective method of survival for the Jewish People, and would return us to our pre-Zionist state of wandering, feeling powerless, and living in constant fear.

This problem has been exacerbated by Anti-Zionist Jews, who claim to speak with the authority of Torah and Jewish tradition. Although a tiny minority, they have an outsized influence on the younger generations and the interfaith community. Ultimately, Anti-Zionist Jews would much rather be powerless and ideologically pure, than struggle with the realities and moral complexities of a Jewish state that has to navigate the challenges of the real world.

Even more concerning is that Anti-Zionism has made its way into the rabbinical schools of the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements, and Hebrew College, my own alma mater, as these seminaries are now ordaining explicitly Anti-Zionist rabbis. I fear that if this trend continues, it will risk cutting off liberal Judaism from the State of Israel.

In order to protect our children from Anti-Zionism and raise them as confident Jews, we must tell our story. We American Jews do a pretty good job of teaching our children how to be Jewish, celebrating holidays and rituals, and preparation for their B'nai Mitzvah. We need to do a better job of teaching them to love the Jewish People and the State of Israel, even with all of its flaws. The single most uplifting thing to happen to the Jewish People in the last hundred years is Zionism and the foundation and thriving of the State of Israel. It is a story so improbable that it is better than fiction.

There were two monumental events that the Jewish People experienced in the middle of the 20th century. American Jews tend to focus more on the one where we were the ultimate victims, led like lambs to the slaughter. Equally important is the one where we took ownership

of our story and acted with agency to birth and build a thriving Jewish nation. We all know who Anne Frank was, but how many of us know about Rachel Bluwstein, Leah Goldberg, or the contributions of Dr. Ruth Westheimer during Israel's War of Independence?

We are seeing the proof that Zionism hacked Jewish history play out in real time. In response to the Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism on college campuses, Jewish students are showing a rise in identification with Israel, despite being more anxious about displaying their Jewishness in public. Participation in Jewish life is up, and Jewish students are attending more pro-Israel events. We might say that Antisemitism is making new Zionists. They are scared, but they are rallying around their identity. The Antisemites don't seem to understand this yet. They are still operating in a pre-Zionist paradigm, expecting us to be the same fearful, cowering Jews we once were. They haven't gotten the memo that we have hacked our operating system. When we tell our children our story, and show them how proud we are to be Jewish, how connected we are to the land and people of Israel, they will become unshakable.

I will repeat something I have said many times in the past year: Antisemitism is the same, but we, the Jewish People, are different. Zionism has reoriented what it means to be Jewish. It has brought a new dimension to our sense of peoplehood, shown us that we are truly connected to our brothers and sisters in Israel, and revitalized us with self-assurance. We must refuse to be afraid, and we overcome our fear by standing tall, reacting with vigilance and confidence. Furthermore, we will earn the respect of people around us, not by portraying ourselves as victims, but by showing how grounded we are in our identity.

Tomorrow, as a part of our observance of Yom Kippur, our cohort of teens will lead readings and songs in the Martyrology service, as we recall those who have given their lives *al kiddush Ha-Shem*, for the sanctification of the name of God. This service, just five days after the one-year anniversary of the October 7th attack against Israel, feels more necessary than ever. These readings and songs take us through Jewish history, from ancient times to the present, guided by the refrain, אֵלֶּה אֶזְכְּרָה וְנַפְשִׁי עָלַי אֲשַׁפָּךְ, "These I recall, and my heart pours out." For this year's martyrology, we have added writings and songs that were composed in response to October 7, and the destruction that it brought to the State of Israel and the Jewish People.

Even as we give voice to the tragedies of our people, including the one that happened just a year ago, we conclude the service with readings and prayers of hope, affirming that the chain continues. May we strengthen that chain with the resolve that Zionism has gifted us. May we pass on that commitment to our children so that they are able to strengthen themselves. The Jewish People are storytellers across generations. Let us tell our story, warts and all, and be strengthened by it, ready to confront the challenges that lay ahead. *Am Yisrael Hai*. The Jewish People Live.