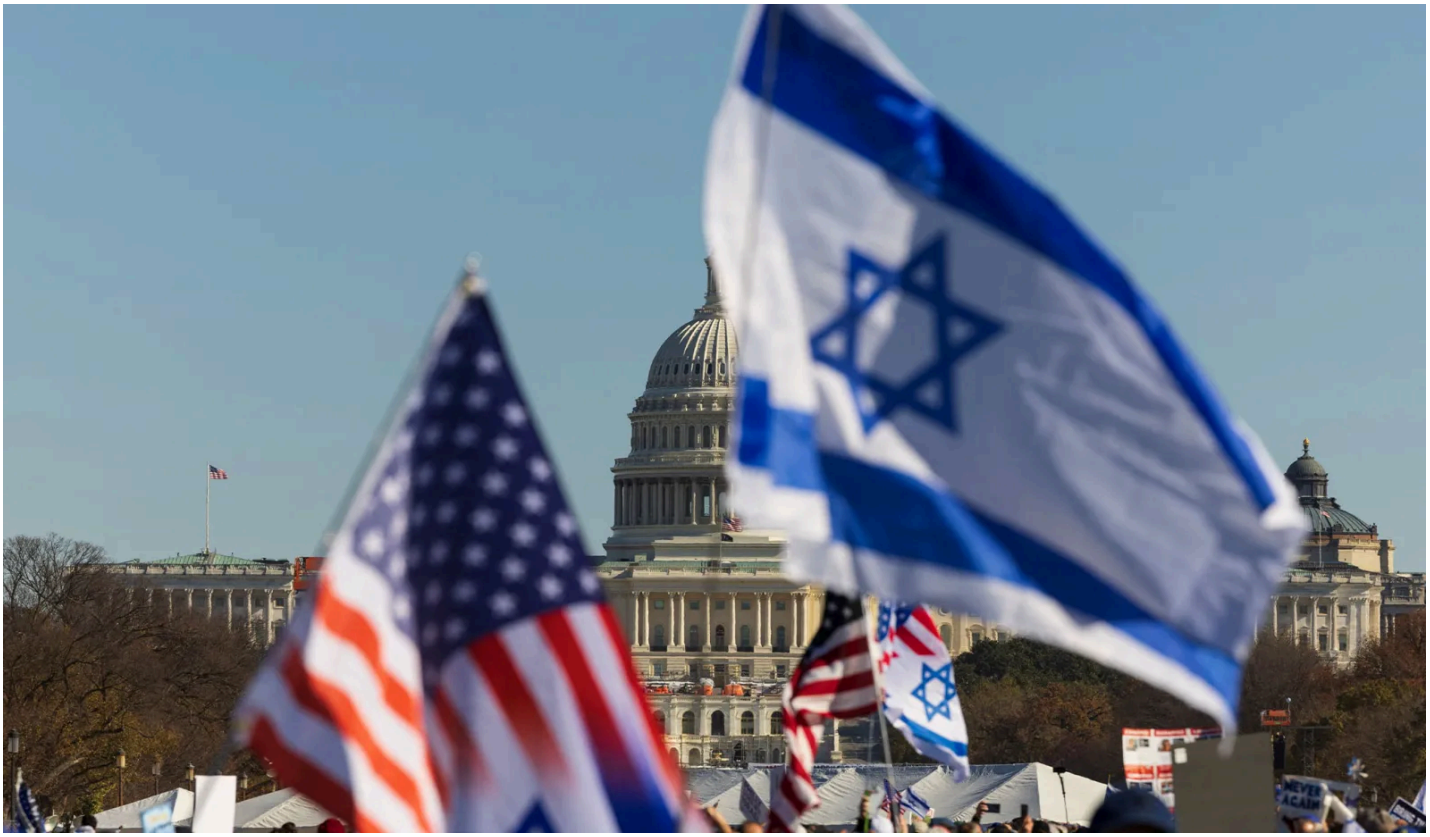
What Jews Mean to America



Israeli and American flags are flown at the March for Israel rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., November 14, 2023. (Tom Brenner/Reuters)

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In the nation's response to the explosion of antisemitism since October 7, nothing less than the future of the free world is at stake

'Some people like Jews, and some do not." With these words Winston Churchill once divided humanity into two categories. Of these groups, Churchill certainly belonged to the former, so much so that a friend of his once reflected, "Even Winston had a fault; he was too fond of Jews." Churchill's own fondness for Jews, and wonder at Jewish history, was linked to his admiration of his predecessor as prime minister. In the same essay, Churchill cited Benjamin Disraeli as having said that "the Lord deals with the nations as the nations deal with the Jews." Churchill concluded, "We must admit that nothing that has since happened in the history of the world has falsified the truth of Disraeli's confident assertion."

Should we seek to summarize our current state of affairs, we could do worse than employ Churchill's words. Some people, very clearly, do not like Jews. On October 7 — that very day, weeks before Israel even entered Gaza — rallies celebrating Hamas's massacre of Israelis could be found on the streets of American cities. Today, in my own neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper West Side, as I walk home from synagogue on the Sabbath, I am confronted by poster after poster of a hostage of Hamas that some fellow New Yorker has chosen to tear at, shred, or deface. As anti-Israeli hate consumed campuses, the blasé way in which the presidents of America's leading universities commented before Congress about the well-being of their own Jewish students reflected, as John Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, wrote, "how unimportant the feelings or concerns of Jews are within the sociological landscapes they tend."

Yet in the face of this terrible trend, other events remind us of a striking feature of American life: Some people *do* like Jews, and in fact some like them a great deal. If one had told a Jew from several centuries ago that, in the year 2023, an antisemitic pogrom would take place and the attack would be celebrated by mobs around the world, this Jew would not have been at all surprised. Yet this Jew would have been *astounded* to learn that, in response to the celebration of this pogrom, one prominent political party of the most powerful country on earth summoned the presidents of some of the most important universities in the land to publicly admonish them for their failings as academic leaders. Such stories of stalwart, public defenses of Jews against a country's elites are not abundant in the annals of Jewish history.

Thus the past terrible months have reminded us not only of the endurance of antisemitism, but also of the remarkable way in which both the state of the Jews and the Jewish state are a prominent preoccupation in American public life. As the (non-Jewish) *Wall Street Journal* columnist Walter Russell Mead has commented, the Jewish past and future maintain "a distinctive place in American historical consciousness and political thought." Israel, Mead remarks, may be "a speck on the map of the world," but it "occupies a continent in the American mind." After two millennia of persecution experienced by Jews at the hands of others, it remains a wonder that a multitude of Americans — almost certainly many millions — ardently embrace their own version of Disraeli's dictum, that God will treat America as it treats the Jews.

What this means is that the debates suffusing the halls of academia and Congress regarding Israel, and the place of Jews in American society, tell us even more about Gentiles than about Jews. It bespeaks two different trends within the West, and two very different possibilities for its future. Understanding why this is so requires us to study the story of the Jews in the West, and to grasp why the current moment offers a clarion call for those who care about the Western future — and the place of America within it.

WHAT is the West? The historian Niall Ferguson, in his brilliant book *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, notes that the term has a certain elasticity. By "the West," some refer to the intellectual achievements that began in ancient Athens, others to the civilization that rose from the ruins of Rome and its empire; others look later, to the technological and economic advancements in the second millennium, which ultimately made possible Europe's profound impact on the world. Still others look even later, to the emergence of liberal democracy in the 18th century.

What *is* clear is that Jews existed long before the impact of Athens or Rome was felt in the world. Unsurprisingly, it was Mark Twain who found a pithy way to express this:

> The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was.

The West's relationship with the Jews has always begun, subconsciously or explicitly, with a query: *Why are they still here?* As the Roman Empire embraced a new faith and what we call Christendom began to emerge, the question of Jewish endurance became particularly perplexing. Much of the moral vision of the Hebrew Bible — embodied above all by the Ten Commandments — lay at the heart of post-pagan, Christian civilization. But the very same Hebraic scripture spoke of a Jewish ingathering in a rebuilt Jerusalem, and this had certainly not occurred; Jerusalem had been sacked by Rome in 70 C.E., and Jews were forbidden even to enter the city. The church understood itself as the new Israel, with the biblical promises to God's chosen made manifest in its own success; yet Jews undeniably remained. The phenomenon was squarely addressed by the greatest Christian mind to emerge out of the ruins of the Roman Empire. Augustine of Hippo put it plainly: "Jews are not admitted into their city, and yet Jews there are."

Why, then, were there still Jews? For Augustine, Jewish endurance was indeed a miracle, but one that bespoke the Jewish loss of chosenness. Providence, for Augustine, had preserved the Jews as an eternal testament to the truth of Christianity. As deniers of the gospel, they were to be denied access to Jerusalem and to political restoration; but, just as Cain in Genesis was exiled by the Almighty but also protected by Him, Christians were forbidden to harm Jews so that Jewish powerlessness would eternally testify to the gospel. To the Jews, Augustine applied a verse in the Psalms: "Slay them not, lest my people forget: scatter them by thy power, and bring them down."

While Augustine's interpretation was not, to put it mildly, a recipe for Jewish equality, it also expressly prohibited assaults on Jews. Given alternative explanations of Jewish endurance that were yet to come, it certainly could have been worse. There is some truth to the wry reflection of the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn that "but for Augustine's lovely brainwave we would have been exterminated long ago." Under Augustinian theology, Jews were allowed to live and, in certain constrained circumstances, even succeed. Augustine's approach became the dominant theology of the West when it was adopted by Pope Gregory in the sixth century, so that pagans were forced to accept Christianity but Jews were not.

This spiritual and social stasis did not last. It is in the high Middle Ages that we find an explosion of vicious violence against Jews in Europe, setting a terrible trend for the next thousand years. At the same time, there were born in Europe lies about Jews that festered and spread, lies that maintain a powerful purchase even today.

WHY was it at this moment that such virulent Jew-hate emerged? The answers often focus on economic aspects of medieval Jewish life. Forbidden to engage in many trades, Jews often served as moneylenders and as financial middlemen between the members of the ruling class and their subjects; all this bred terrible resentment. But this explanation is insufficient. The hatred aimed at Jews in the Middle Ages targeted not only the Jews themselves but *Judaism*; the blood libel asserted that Jews

used the blood of Christian children in their Passover celebrations, and in the courts of kings the Talmud was denounced as a threat to Christians. All this reflects a more theological element to antisemitism.

To truly understand this hatred, we must focus on a phenomenon that, for Ferguson, was the source of much conflict in Europe over centuries but that also set the stage for eventual Western dominance. In contrast to the empires of the East, medieval Europe featured a number of nation-states; this meant that diverse national identities developed in Europe and contested for supremacy. An inventive effervescence emerged from this rivalry, says Ferguson, leading to the development of weaponry and other technology as countries "all encouraged commerce, conquest and colonization as part of their competition with one another."

Ferguson notes how this fierce competition between national identities often resulted in war, presenting great dangers to "those who lived at the frontiers between the dozen or so bigger European states." This is true, but it was often even more dangerous for Jews within those states. Nations developing their own sense of identity and national pride looked to the Jewish people's mysterious endurance and were suddenly reminded of their own temporality and finitude. The great early-20th-century Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig described this phenomenon: "Just as every individual must reckon with his eventual death, the peoples of the world foresee their eventual extinction, be it however distant in time." A love of one's own nation, he reflected, is "pregnant with the presentiment of death." But in Jews, Rosenzweig writes, a nation is given a reminder that there is one people that is not like theirs: "The peoples of the world foresee a time when their land with its rivers and mountains still lies under heaven as it does today, but other people dwell there; when their language is entombed in books, and their laws and customs have lost their living power. We alone cannot imagine such a time."

Jew-hate is rooted in resentment of this undeniable fact of history. The West emerged in all its vitality in a plethora of nations and national rivalries, but as each nation sought to establish its strength, the Jew became a mirror reminding it of its finitude. The result was rage, what the Jewish columnist Jonathan Rosenblum has called "eternity envy."

This is why, in medieval antisemitism, the very symbols of Jewish faith, endurance, and vibrancy were turned by antisemites into symbols of purported perniciousness. The Christian writer Robert Nicholson has correctly conjectured that the disease of antisemitism "almost always grows from a resentment of 'chosenness': the idea that the Jewish god appointed one nation, the nation of Israel, to play a special role in history." This hatred, he argues, becomes a "grand anti-myth that turns Jewish chosenness on its head and assigns to the people of Israel responsibility for all the world's ills."

Throughout European history, in the midst of this great competition among nation-states, many turned on the Jews as each acquired its own sense of self. In 1144, less than a hundred years after the Norman Conquest, the blood libel was born in England when the death of a boy named William of Norwich was blamed on the local Jews and insanely linked to Jewish Passover preparations; in 1190, the Jews were massacred at York; in 1290, the Jews were expelled. As medieval France reached new heights of power under "Saint Louis," the Talmud was targeted for its imagined sinister content and burned in the streets of Paris. The Jews were expelled from France not long after, in 1306. Immediately after Aragon and Castile completed the conquest of Iberia, unifying Spain and restoring it to Christian rule in 1492, the Spanish monarchs expelled all Jews who refused to convert and assimilate; over the next several centuries "Judaizers" who had secretly stayed were hunted down. In the mid 17th

century, Bogdan Chmelnitzki's Cossacks helped fashion Ukraine's sense of nationhood in rebelling against the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, but they murdered and mutilated thousands of Jews in the process.

Then, in Western Europe, one polity pointed the way to a different relationship with the Jewish people. The Dutch republic, having earned independence from the Habsburgs, allowed Jews to come to Amsterdam, to build synagogues openly, and to create communities. For the scholar Steven Nadler, this was because the Dutch "saw their own recent history — their campaign for political sovereignty, liberated from Spain, and for religious freedom from Catholic oppression — reflected in the biblical story of the Israelite struggle for emancipation from bondage in Egypt and the subsequent fight to claim the lands that God had promised them." The Jews of the Netherlands thrived and looked to new opportunities. From Amsterdam, a Jewish petition was sent to another ruler, who had overthrown a king and established a republic; this man, Oliver Cromwell, expressed openness to a Jewish return to England, which occurred in 1656. In Britain and the Netherlands, the Jews were welcomed, but they were in no way political equals. It was in the New World that another republic would rise and reflect a new way of seeing the Jews — and a new way of seeing itself.

On July 4, 1776, a committee comprising John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson was created by the Continental Congress and charged with developing a seal and symbol of the nascent United States. These Founders suggested an image of Moses and Pharaoh at the splitting of the sea, along with a motto: "Rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God." The suggestion, ultimately not adopted, reflected not these men's devout religiosity but their deep understanding of American culture and the place of the Hebrew Bible within it.

The scriptural connection lies at the heart of the American vision. The very word "democracy" derives from ancient Athens, but there is one essential American idea of which the ancient Greeks never conceived: equality. "You don't get out of Plato and Aristotle," the scholar and bioethicist Leon Kass has reflected, "an account that would sustain the view of the equal dignity of every human being." Rather, liberal democracy rests on the sense that, as first stated in Genesis, "both man and woman [are] equally made in God's image." Only a notion of rights derived from the Creator was believed to be sustainable — which is why John Adams, looking with horror across the ocean at the godless revolution fought in France, predicted the tyranny that would result.

But America felt bound to the Hebrew Bible also because of the way it saw itself. It compared itself to Israel of old not only because, like the Dutch, it had overthrown an empire, but because — as it ultimately announced on its seal — it believed itself to be chosen by providence to present to the world a *novus ordo seclorum*, a new order for the ages, as ancient Israel had been chosen to bring the monotheistic message to humanity. Sometimes it takes a foreigner to see how uniquely American this biblical attitude was. The late British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks saw this quite clearly:

> It is no accident that the founders of America turned to the Hebrew Bible, or that successive presidents have done likewise, because there is no other text in Western literature that draws on these themes — history, providence, covenant, responsibility, the need to fight for freedom in every generation — together in a vision that is at once political and spiritual.

“Israel, ancient and modern, and the United States are the two supreme examples of societies constructed in conscious pursuit of an idea,” Rabbi Sacks concluded. Of all the writings of the Founders, it is a letter from George Washington to the Jews of Savannah in 1790 that best expresses this:

> May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land — whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation — still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

Here, Washington tells his fellow citizens that the tales of the Exodus and of America parallel each other: The Jews were not only to be welcomed as equals in America; their story inspired America. For the first president, God’s blessings bestowed upon the Jews had never been removed — and he hoped that his nascent nation could be similarly blessed.

Such a letter from a Gentile head of state to the Jews is perhaps unique in history. The letter’s import was not only political but theological; for, in a remarkable way, the American relationship with the Jewish people turned much of Western history on its head. Whereas Augustine and his heirs saw Jewish endurance as a sign of divine punishment, and whereas medieval Europe saw in Jewish eternity a threat to its own identity, America looked to the Jewish story as an indication of divine blessing, and therefore as a source of inspiration for the sort of country America was called to be. America came to see itself as a covenantal nation proclaiming to the world a concept of equality that was the gift of God; the American Revolution, Abraham Lincoln argued, was fought not only for independence but for “that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.”

Of course, America from the very beginning violated its covenant by failing to honor the truth that “all men are created equal.” It was to the imagery of the Hebrew Bible that America’s greatest president turned in urging America to embrace its covenantal calling. And in so doing, Lincoln used language that also reflected the uniqueness of America in the Jewish story:

> I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

“Almost chosen people” is a perfect phrase. What it means is that America is not biblical Israel’s replacement; it does not seek to supersede or supplant the Jews. It does not envy Israel’s eternity but seeks to learn from it and be blessed by it; it is biblical Israel’s imitator, learning the lessons of Israel’s story. Whereas other nations saw in Jewish eternity a reminder of their own ultimate demise, America, as Lincoln argued, learned from the biblical

story that it could hope that it would not “perish from the earth” if it remained true to its covenantal calling. The phrase “almost chosen people” warns and inspires America, implicitly embracing the faith that, despite centuries of exile, God’s covenant with the original “chosen people” remained.

Then, in 1948, that faith was vindicated.

The 1940s were the worst, and the greatest, decade in modern Jewish history. Hitler saw the eternal Jewish people as the ultimate threat to his thousand-year Reich. Driven by jealousy and hatred of a people that refused to be destroyed, he was convinced that he would succeed, for the first time in history, in achieving its destruction. He came closer than most. Three years after his death, the modern state of Israel was born. By 1967, Jerusalem was a united Jewish city. “Jews are not admitted into their city,” Augustine had commented, “yet Jews there are.” Suddenly, as the Hebrew prophets had promised, Jerusalem was a Jewish capital once again.

But as modern Israel prospered, much of the West lost faith in itself — and in the process lost faith in faith. Many Europeans saw in a strong Jewish state a reminder of the biblical past that Europe suddenly chose to elide and eschew. In 2004 a constitution for the European Union was created whose preposterous preface described the history of Europe without a single mention of Christianity. What had once been the center of the Western world sought to forget much of what it had once believed.

Amid the collapse of confidence within much of the West, the story of Israel, and of the Jews, became even more important to many Americans. One striking embodiment of this aspect of American life is House Speaker Mike Johnson, who, having just emerged from relative obscurity, took the stage at the pro-Israel rally on the Mall in November and delivered the single sentence that received perhaps the greatest response from the crowd: “Calls for a cease-fire are outrageous.” Johnson’s Evangelical Christian faith is central to his political persona, and to his support for the Jewish state; but, as Walter Russell Mead has argued, those who simplistically link American pro-Israeli policies to Evangelical influence “have missed at least half the story.” It is not merely that many Americans of faith support Israel but that Israel’s story supports faith. Many religious Americans, Mead argues, find in Israel the vindication of traditional Western, and especially American, beliefs. Israel’s story is seen as the ultimate indication that “God exists; he drives history; he performs miracles in real time; God’s word in the Bible is true.”

The Lord deals with the nations, Disraeli said, as the nations deal with the Jews; and it is this providential connection between history and the Jewish people that has sustained many Americans’ sense of self. Americans of faith see a Europe that has forgotten its biblical past, a place once called Christendom that has for all intents and purposes ceased to exist; and they see a progressive culture in America that is hostile to all they believe. In the face of this, they draw inspiration from the endurance of democratic Israel, believing that with God’s help the American vision can endure as well. In a striking way, a Jewish capital in the Middle East has become a capital for those still clinging to the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West, to those holding fast to the way in which America saw itself. Eric Cohen, of the Tikvah Fund, has insightfully noted how inspiration from Israel’s miraculous story now joins Jews and Christians together: “Jerusalem, forever the Jews’ city of hope and once again the West’s, is now the emblem of our shared purpose: to work with faith, political will, and moral resolve to rescue and defend our shared heritage from destruction and decay.”

It is only with this in mind that we can truly understand the intense hatred directed at Israel from the American Left. Many point to a progressive ideology that divides all individuals into oppressors and oppressed, with Jews considered the former. There is truth to this interpretation, but it does not explain why Israel is hated with a vociferousness that exceeds other progressive obsessions. Progressives elementally understand that Israel, ancient and modern, is a profound source of inspiration in the way America sees itself as a covenantal people. Many progressives, meanwhile, are driven by the fierce belief that America has *never* been a nation dedicated to a great idea; preposterous Pulitzer Prize–winning articles argue that 1619, rather than 1776, marks America's founding. In this telling, America was never biblically inspired to promote the idea of equality to the world, and its story is entirely a tale of evil and oppression. Woke progressives hate Israel because they hate America; they work, above all, to undermine the notion that America can consider itself a covenantal nation, and they therefore hate the embodiment of the original covenantal nation.

If America's unique relationship with the Jewish people continues — and if the Jewish state continues to be a source of sympathy and admiration — then the entire progressive project, in its current form, is endangered. This is why the more the righteousness of Israel's current cause is revealed, the more agitated and angry the antisemites become. Thus we have those who claw at posters of child hostages, destroying evidence of the evil of Israel's enemies. The phenomenon is an example of the now-popular internet meme, taken from a British comedy show, in which one SS officer turns to another in a brief revelatory moment and asks: "Are we the baddies?" The answer, for these individuals, is too horrible to contemplate, and so they are driven, in a rage, to remove the images that indict not only Hamas but themselves as well.

The confrontation in Congress between Republican representatives and the university presidents was therefore more than a mere hearing; it embodied a choice between two ways of seeing the American future. And that means that the explosion of antisemitism endangers more than the Jews. In his magisterial biography of Harry Truman, David McCullough describes how the vice president was dragged away from his card game on Capitol Hill and rushed to the White House, where he was greeted by a somber Eleanor Roosevelt. "Harry," she said, "the president is dead." Shocked, not initially comprehending what this meant for him, he responded by offering Eleanor and her family consolation and support: "Is there anything I can do for you?" To this, Eleanor candidly replied, "Is there anything we can do for *you*? For you are the one in trouble now."

Since October 7, I have received numerous emails and messages from American faith leaders and non-Jewish friends expressing their concern for, and solidarity with, the Jewish people. The substance of their communication is essentially: *Is there anything I can do for you?* The messages are heartwarming, inspiring, and deeply appreciated. But my own initial reaction has been a desire to respond, in friendship, that the danger is truly not only for Jews, but for all of us as Americans: *You are the one who is in trouble now*.

Come what may, the Jewish people will endure. I believe that this is guaranteed by God; and I also understand, with gratitude, that there exists today a Jewish state that will win its war and prove itself again capable of defending itself. But the targeting of Jews on America's campuses and in its cities is a sign of a deep threat to the future of America, of the growing strength of those who hate the biblical way in which America has seen itself.

Not long ago, I interviewed Natan Sharansky in Jerusalem. I described to him how, on a recent episode of *Jeopardy!*, when presented with the most famous verse of the 23rd Psalm, none of the three contestants could identify the book of the Bible it came from. Given that his own memoir of the Gulag is titled "Fear No Evil," and

that in it he recounts how important Reagan's celebration of the Bible was to those who studied it in Soviet prisons, I asked him how this contemporary biblical ignorance made him feel.

As part of his response, Sharansky told a remarkable story. After an antisemitic attack in Paris, he asked the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut whether Jews had a future in France. The real question, Finkielkraut replied, was whether *France* had a future in France: whether the French would continue to defend Western values. Sharansky added to me that he had never thought America would face the same question about itself. But now, he reflected, he saw in college campuses self-loathing from Americans and an attempt to erase their country's identity. The explosion of Jew-hate, for Sharansky, was a reflection of this same phenomenon; it posed the question of whether there was a future for America in America. It is, in other words, America that is in trouble now.

The rallies against Israel on college campuses and in the streets, and the explosions of antisemitism that have been made manifest in the past months, are more than just another episode in the millennia-long story of the Jews. This is a moment that asks Americans whether they see themselves as the Founders once did. On their answer hangs nothing less than the future of the free world, which is led still by an "almost chosen people" that welcomed the chosen people into its midst and, inspired by the Jewish biblical story, became a beacon to the world.

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