

How 2023's Dark Cloud Could Yield A Silver Lining

AFTER THE SHOCKING UPHEAVALS OF THE LAST THREE MONTHS, ARE ISRAELI AND AMERICAN JEWS READY TO RETHINK LONG-HELD POSITIONS?

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Israel, a miracle since Day One of its declaration of statehood 75 years ago, has managed to survive and thrive in a hostile region because of its uncanny ability to adjust – wisely and rapidly – to the crises of the moment. Consider this most recent and dramatic example:



From protest to support: One of many centers where thousands of volunteers are aiding the IDF soldiers and displaced citizens.

In the first week of October, the grass-roots Israeli protest movement, led by former IDF soldiers calling themselves BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN ARMS, was in high gear, continuing its huge weekly rallies in opposition to the government. During the 10 months of these protests, Israelis had become increasingly divided over their political future, with the Netanyahu coalition pushing hard for major judicial reform and critics insisting that the changes presented a threat to democracy. There was widespread talk of civil war.

A week later, in the wake of the horrific attack by Hamas terrorists on October 7, the darkest day in the country's history, BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN ARMS had pivoted overnight from protesting against the government to initiating a major effort to care for the survivors of Israel's destroyed kibbutzim in the south, finding temporary lodgings for them, distributing food and saving animals.

Over the next few days, as the IDF prepared its military campaign, the group, now named BROTHERS AND SISTERS FOR ISRAEL, expanded its efforts, creating logistic centers in Tel Aviv and other cities and coordinating a wide range of social service and medical projects involving tens of thousands of volunteers who continue its work every day.

Remarkably, a group committed to opposing the government coalition reversed course virtually overnight in support of the government's commitment to destroy Hamas and save the kidnapped hostages. And a society on the brink of a civil war came together, overwhelmingly supportive of a military war, despite its heavy costs.

What we have witnessed in the last three months of 2023 is the very worst and the very best of Israel on display:

- the complete collapse of the government in failing in its most basic duty of protecting its citizens from harm;
- and the resilience, creativity and compassion of a society that put aside its deep differences by working together to ensure the survival of the Jewish state.

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The contrast between the responses of the government and its citizens could not be sharper. It soon became abundantly clear that the energy and successes within Israeli society post-October 7 were coming from the bottom up. The leadership was not a factor; it was volunteers who stepped up and acted. In addition, **there seemed to be a silent agreement among Israelis to put aside their devastating disappointment with the ruling coalition until after the war's end.**

Whether Netanyahu will be able to ride out his unpopularity and remain in office for another three years in office seems unlikely now, but he has a history of fooling critics who have counted him out countless times.

TIME TO 'BUILD A NEW REALITY'

It is tragic that 2023 was the worst year in Israel's 75 years of statehood; the year ahead remains unknown. It could bring a continuation of the brutal Gaza campaign, with the dreaded daily reports of the deaths of the nation's brave young soldiers and constant concern over the fate of the hostages. And the war could lead to an even wider conflict with Hezbollah in the north while the West Bank violence continues, or openly erupts.

Ironically, though, there is a chance that the very chaos and upheaval of the past year could bring about a sense of humility among Israelis and their leaders, recognizing that the mistakes of the past offer an opportunity to re-think old assumptions and commit to long delayed civic goals.

"Our certainties have been cracked...in this emotional and intellectual earthquake," observed Micha Goodman, a leading Israeli philosopher and public intellectual, days after October 7.

"Everything will be on the table" for review after the war, he said. **"Israel will be created all over again,"** providing a chance to "build a new reality."

Already we have seen dramatic shifts. Significant numbers of *charedim* who have long viewed themselves as removed from the rest of society, are taking an active role in volunteer efforts for the soldiers and displaced citizens. In addition, several hundred *charedim* have registered to join the IDF just weeks after *charedi* coalition partners insisted on passing legislation to keep their young men out of military service.

Goodman envisions a renewed effort, put off since the creation of the state, to craft a Constitution that finally would "define and design the rules of the game," addressing the longstanding tensions between religion and state that led to the Netanyahu government's attempts at judicial overhaul.

Of course controversial societal issues will still be seen through the lens of politics and ideology.

Those leaning left may well conclude that the Gaza war, as well as the violent outbreaks in the West Bank and rocket attacks from Hezbollah, prove the need to seek a serious path toward a two-state solution, acknowledging that the Palestinians are not going away.

Those on the right may insist the current situation underscores that Palestinians remain determined to destroy the Jewish state and that the only response is to defeat, rule over or displace them.

But Israelis share a common belief that this war is not just with Hamas: it is a regional conflict whose primary and most powerful enemy is Iran. The question of whether and how to confront Tehran hangs heavy over Jerusalem.

DIFFERENT REACTION TO GAZA BOMBINGS

There is a distinct difference between how Israelis and Americans respond to Israel's bombing effort and the alarmingly high death rate among the citizens of Gaza. Israelis, deeply committed to the IDF campaign, view the horrific Oct. 7 attack, with its unspeakable brutality against women and children, as the heart of their emotional, political and moral outlook. They blame Hamas for initiating the conflict and insist that there is no way to defeat terrorists – who wear civilian clothes, place booby-traps in mosques, hospitals and schools, create vast underground tunnels and use innocent Gazans as human shields – without doing harm to civilians, however unintentional. **Israelis acknowledge they can have little or no emotional space for empathy at this moment for Gazans, many of whom support Hamas.**

What's more, Israeli media have downplayed the tragic results of the bombings in Gaza, rarely if ever interviewing survivors or showing videos or photos of dead bodies. That's a far cry from mainstream media in the U.S., which have prominently displayed the ruins and victims on a daily basis. Americans, even those, like President Biden himself, who fully support Israel's right to wage war on Hamas, are sickened and deeply disturbed by the level of physical and human destruction in Gaza.

Still, the majority of Americans continue to support Israel's right to defend itself against a terrorist group committed to destroying the Jewish state and murdering Jews. Biden has received much praise for his statements and actions of sincere empathy for Israel in this conflict, including from Israelis who not long ago saw Donald Trump as their hero. Billboards in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem that once praised America's former president now thank Biden for his support, which is hurting him at home in his own Democratic party.

A number of polls show a sharp and disturbing distinction between Americans – including Jews – under 30, and those who are middle-age and older regarding support for Israel. The older the voter, the more likely they back Israel. But the majority of 18-to-29-year-old Americans sympathize with the Palestinians, and growing numbers of younger American Jews do as well.²

A WAKE-UP CALL FOR GEN Z?

The most dramatic U.S. statistics regarding Jewish concerns, though, reflect a skyrocketing increase in anti-Semitism, not only on the far right among white nationalists, but increasingly among elite university professors and students on the left who have taken up the Palestinian cause with a vengeance. Whether or not undergrads understand the intended meaning of their chant, "From the river to the sea Palestine will be free," which eliminates the State of Israel altogether – or whether they even know which river and sea are being referenced – the point is that **too many young people are either unaware of the history and complexity of the Mideast conflict or have been taken in by the false, simplistic narrative of "oppressor" and "oppressed."**

Even Ivy League college presidents couldn't bring themselves to give a clear moral response rather than a cautious legalistic one when asked in Congress whether calling for genocide against Jews would violate their university's code of conduct.

² See my Dec. 3 report: 'Israelism': A Damning Critique On How We Teach About Israel.

Will that shocking scene in Congress and the wave of anti-Semitic acts at universities prompt a wake-up call among younger Jews?

Dramatic events related to Israel, whether they be successes or failures, can have a powerful impact on Jews everywhere.

An earlier generation of young American Jews in the 1960s were drawn to Israel, and a deep sense of Jewish pride, following the miraculous Israeli victory over Arab forces in the 1967 Six-Day War. Six years later, when Israel came dangerously close to being defeated in the Yom Kippur War, Jews in the diaspora came to realize how much the Jewish state meant to them and that they could not take its survival for granted.

Today, there is deep concern in our community that a significant and growing percentage of **Gen Z American Jews feel less connected to Jewish life and more critical of Israel than their parents.** Perhaps their witnessing, and in some cases being a victim of, blatant anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism on campus will cause them to reflect on who they can rely on and who they can't in times of crisis. Some may choose to walk away from the burden of being a Jew. But I hope that many more will reflect on and strengthen their Jewish identity, appreciating their history, heritage and connection to Jews around the world.

Bret Stephens, the Opinion columnist who has been a voice of support for Israel in the pages of The New York Times, has noted that the real question in dealing with anti-Semitism isn't how to "solve" it but "how to thrive in the face of it." He believes **the major challenge to the Jewish community "isn't to fight anti-Semitism. It is to give future generations a reason to remain Jewish."**

In an interview in September, he told me he'd like to "create a Museum of Jewish Ideas" that have been given to the world, including "monotheism, peoplehood, the Sabbath, social justice and universal literacy," and for us **to instill in Jewish young people the understanding that they are being given "a treasure" to cherish.**

At a time when Israeli and American Jews have been shocked and humbled by unimaginable traumatic events – a barbaric assault on Israeli civilians in their own homes, and rampant displays of anti-Semitism across America – a new and more honest relationship between the two communities can develop that will lead to deeper understanding and relations.

On the eve of a new year and all the major challenges we will face, we should keep in mind the model of the Brothers and Sisters no longer "in Arms" but "for Israel," who responded to a profound crisis with over-arching creativity and compassion for the people and peoplehood that bind us.

As we recite this Shabbat at the end of reading the Book of Genesis, "*chazak, chazak v'nitchazek*" – "be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another."