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Who Builds the Motherland?

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Who Builds the Motherland?

Abstract

I was born in 2002 into a middle-class Jewish family, in a very Jewish town. The town was our Zion, our Mini-Israel, our bubble. It prided itself on being a sleepy town where any American can feel safe and comfortable. At the best of times, the town felt like a family; everyone knew your name and many children born in the town decided to live the rest of their adult lives there. It was a place where the support of Israel was of utmost importance. Although everyone prided themselves on the security, there was always this unease that our human rights could be taken away by those others that outnumbered us. After all, it only took two years from Hitler's rise to power to his passing of the Nuremberg laws. With this fear of history repeating itself, every Jew in the bubble, whether they be Reform or Orthodox, Ashkenazi or Sephardic, talked of the grandeur of the Israeli state. Because no matter how slim the odds may seem that the worst-case scenario could happen, any chance that it could happen again was unacceptable for the descendants of the victims of the Holocaust. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Jewish identity, racism, Israel, Georges Lieber

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Comments

Third place winner of the 2020 Georges Lieber Essay Contest on Resistance.

Ben Goldman

Who builds the Motherland?

I was born in 2002 into a middle-class Jewish family, in a very Jewish town. The town was our Zion, our Mini-Israel, our bubble. It prided itself on being a sleepy town where any American can feel safe and comfortable. At the best of times, the town felt like a family; everyone knew your name and many children born in the town decided to live the rest of their adult lives there. It was a place where the support of Israel was of utmost importance. Although everyone prided themselves on the security, there was always this unease that our human rights could be taken away by those others that outnumbered us. After all, it only took two years from Hitler's rise to power to his passing of the Nuremberg laws. With this fear of history repeating itself, every Jew in the bubble, whether they be Reform or Orthodox, Ashkenazi or Sephardic, talked of the grandeur of the Israeli state. Because no matter how slim the odds may seem that the worst-case scenario could happen, any chance that it could happen again was unacceptable for the descendants of the victims of the Holocaust.

Abba Kovner was a Belarusian Jew born in 1918, and moved to Vilnius, Poland (now part of Lithuania) in 1927. From there, he lived an authentic Jewish life in the Jewish sector of Vilnius. He attended synagogue, practiced Passover, studied the Torah, married a Jewish woman, and was planning on having a Jewish family just like his peers. Jews lived in Poland for a thousand years. It would be unheard of for that to suddenly change. Yet, life anywhere in Eastern Europe was tough for a Jew as it always had been. There was destruction of property, physical assaults, and in the worst cases, pogroms. The true pain came from being treated as a fifth column. Anti-Semitic laws targeted Jews, both segregating them and also degrading the space they were limited to in Polish society. They were limited to classes specifically reserved for them or they were not permitted to attend schools all together. They were excluded from government offices, despite being well-qualified. And when they turned to other educated fields, trade unions followed suit by banning Jews from joining. As a response, Polish Jews formed their own unions which actually became quite respected. Politicians and newspapers blamed Jews for Poland's Great Depression and openly talked about how they were vermin holding back Christian society well before the Nazi Party was even founded. So, it was no wonder Kovner joined the Zionist youth group, HaShomer HaTzair. If the gentiles did not want them to live in Poland, then the Jews must find their own place in the sun.

Yet, it was not the Poles who pushed the Jews out of Poland, not for lack of trying. Even as the Nazis were marching into Warsaw, the far-right parties of Poland continued to discuss their "Jewish Question of Poland." The Nazis answered that question with the forced ghettoization of the Jews. Millions of Polish Jews were sent to ghettos in Warsaw and Vilnius. They then built walls in the ghettos so no one could enter or exit. Kovner defied this and escaped

the ghetto with his friends. They took refuge in a Dominican Convent. From the outside, he saw people being taken from the ghetto, forced to dig their own graves, and were shot and killed. He heard of the Ponary massacre where men, women, and children were murdered and thrown into mass graves. Kovner quickly realized what the Nazis were planning, and that the only way to stop them was to form a force to fight back. He wrote a manifesto titled, "Let us not go like lambs to the slaughter!" He was the first to use that phrase in the context of the Holocaust. He advocated for an uprising like that in Warsaw, yet most Jews in the ghettos would not listen. To them, not even the Nazis who assaulted them, oppressed them, and put them into squalorous ghettos could be so cruel as to do what Kovner said they would do. After all, this was not too different from what they had already experienced throughout their lives. Unfortunately, Kovner was completely correct.

My father was born in 1967, into a half-Jewish family in Arizona. Being the only Jew in his middle school was tough because despite being nearly exactly like his peers, he was still treated as an outsider because of his religion with which he barely associated. He was bullied, of course. He quickly became accustomed to the anti-Semitic slurs used by the same comedians who thought dropping pennies in front of him was an original and hilarious joke. Even the "friends" he made, never dropped their bigotry, but instead conceded that he was "one of the good ones." Unsurprisingly, my dad would find them claiming that they could never be anti-Semitic as one of their friends was a Jew. Despite the mistreatment, however, my father never asked why being Jewish was such a crime causing him to become a pariah. He did he care to ask why. My dad never thought they were anything more than a bunch of fools. Their hive mind bothered him more than anything else. Even when he was outnumbered in fights that he never started, and when he inevitably lost and was kicked and pummeled into the ground from their stinging blows, his opinions of the bullies never was more than mere disgust at their poor humor. On some days they would pummel him, and other days he would fight back, and this black comedy would perpetuate until he finally brought a knife to school and claimed that he would, "Stab the shit out of you if you fuck with me again." I doubt he actually wanted to gut people, and luckily he never had to, but this experience forever stung him like an angry wasp. "There's no reasoning with these people. They hated us when they were in first grade and you aren't changing that."

It was late 1943, when Abba Kovner was born in the flesh of a Belorussian, Jewish Zionist stuck in German occupied Eastern Europe, he became the de-facto leader of the United Partisan Organization (UPO). He was only 25 at this time. The Vilna Ghetto has just been liquidated and its inhabitants sent to their deaths in nearby death camps. The war currently waged at this time was both the most horrific event ever seen in human history and also an insight into human nature. The rising death toll seemed to have left all parties to reveal their true selves. As it turned out, not only did the Nazis wish the death of the Jewish "race," they also wanted the death of all the Slavs too. This came as a shock to the Poles who would have once endorsed the expulsion of Jews, and the Soviets too. They never expected the Germans to strike,

but then they did and with appalling viciousness. Out of all countries, it was the Soviet Union who had the most casualties. So it goes. The Nazis also believed that the complete extermination of inferior races was necessary for the Aryan Volk to prosper. One of Hitler's goals included destroying Moscow, killing all its inhabitants, and creating a lake over the city's bones to wipe out the eastern land from "Judeo-Bolshevik" influence. This was not unlike his aspirations in Warsaw, Leningrad, and Vilnius, which were all leveled by the war's end. As for the Soviets, who once shook hands with the Nazis that raped and pillaged their land, they now responded in kind with grim determination to take back their country. And now both the Communist and the Zionist, who would later become stark enemies, found that they must fight together or die alone. And with that realization, Abba Kovner hid his pride and shook hands with the red devil to become a Soviet partisan. His loyalties still lied with the Israel-to-be rather than the proletarian masses, but the Soviet Union was the only nation left in Europe that could stop the Nazis. And so he marched on evermore.

I know of a Jewish kid, also born in 1942 like I was, whose name I cannot say. His family suffered greatly while living in the Soviet Union. I have never seen anyone so devoted to his family. He read the Torah because his father and brothers did, and he had to be like them. He applied for Israeli citizenship because his family did. And he decided when he was six years old that he would be a doctor just like his father and brothers. His father told stories of how poor they were under the Red Flag, how Stalin attempted to purge Jews like his father, and how many of his family were sent to gulags because of their supposed disloyalty. The son was livid. Not just at the Communists, who he believed were liars and losers, but at those who took both America and Israel for granted. He loved America for defending both the free world and the free markets, and Israel for being the most well-defended sanctuary for Jews. Did that mean he looked away when the United States helped overthrow democratically elected "socialist" governments, or when Jewish settlers started taking land from Palestinians who held it for generations? Yes, but not for any reason other than those people were simply not his own. His family were his roots, and he would be their bark.

It was 1945 when the world was born again in fire and ash. One of the Jews left alive was Abba Kovner. Kovner along with other survivors made a strong effort to record and remember the events of the war, lest it happen again. Both the Allies and the Comintern sought to mark this history as part of their Denazification programs. Kovner, however, did not really care for Denazification because it was too little and too late. He had to focus on another more important goal for the Jews left alive. The survivors needed safe places to live as countries throughout the world had turned their backs on them. Kovner became a founder of Bricha and aided Holocaust survivors to leave for Israel. The organization was a veteran of this war, as Kovner and other Jewish partisans smuggled out Jews as early as 1944, and would eventually assist hundreds of thousands of Jews in leaving Eastern Europe. As he was helping the Zionist movement, Kovner formed another organization designed to change Europe. This new group had the objective to right the wrongs of the war and finally give solace to Jews long weary of this millennium. From

a table, surrounded by friends and comrades he knew and trusted, he declared his plans. Abba Kovner decreed that Jews are God's chosen people and therefore followers of his will, and that six million Germans must be killed so that Jews everywhere could be saved.

In 1985, my dad moved to Philadelphia to study at the University of Pennsylvania and met his then girlfriend and now wife. Philadelphia was where my mom was born into a Jewish family, and it was where she planned to die too. Dad could not complain, as anything was better than how he was treated in Arizona. Yet, the Northeastern Jews did not even consider my dad to be Jewish because his mother was not Jewish. It was particularly ironic that the Jewish Philadelphians did not consider him Jewish considering the Christian Arizonans certainly did. This was a problem because being Jewish was the only way he could marry his girlfriend. But to marry the pretty Jewish girl, he (somehow) swooned in college, he still had to convert to Judaism, even though he had always been considered a Jew before. And this also meant he had to strip naked in front of a bunch of old Rabbis, who would hold his head down into the water, hopefully without them looking down. He mostly found it funny, but the experience always made him feel as though he was not part of the Jewish community. He was fine with this as he never really believed in God. But even if he was a believer, he still decided to disconnect himself from the community at large. Because, to my dad, the very same contempt that attached to him in the Southwest followed him to the Northeast.

The bigotry of the Jews in the bubble was subtle, but still visible. It crept upon us in conversations of urban crime, the country becoming too offended, and most commonly over comments regarding the Middle East. Every Jew in the bubble, my dad included, thought they had a right to settle in Israel and that the Arab nations that attacked the fledgling, Jewish State were the invaders. Eventually, comments that Israel was the only nice place in the Middle East and that the rest were "third world sand sh*tholes," or hearing about how Muslims were fundamentalist by nature and therefore Bibi was being too soft on the Palestinians, at the very least unnerved him. My dad always liked the idea of Israel, but to him that was nothing more than vacation and invocation for the Jews. He always said to me, half-jokingly, that he wished the Bricha and other Zionist groups would petition to buy Baja from Mexico and become good trade partners with the U.S. This, he claimed, would truly defend the Jews from outside nations, and give a nice summer vacation spot that wouldn't involve a ten hour flight. Zionism was nothing more to him than that. So when the suburban Jews talked of how Israel was good because it was given by God, or how certain people should not be allowed to pray at the west wall, he considered it to be a rerun of the fundamentalist Christians he knew in Arizona. Though, this time he understood why they felt this way about Muslims and Palestinians. Jews were victims of gentiles for thousands of years, and although he never experienced a pogrom or forced exile, he still faced its vestiges. But as his years in the bubble went by, his dreams for a peaceful Judea waned, marred from the bloody business in the Middle East, and the reluctance of the Jews of America to admit that they could have gone too far.

To me, Israel, when it was birthed in 1948, should have been a nursing home for Jews. I'll admit that I have not learned much during my time in Hebrew school. I barely know the Hebrew alphabet, hardly any of the prayers or their meaning, and my Torah reading is spottier than I would like it to be. But if there was one thing I was able to unearth from the archaeological vestiges of my Jewish schooling, it is that the Jews are tired. We are tired from the traveling, tired from the hate, tired of the deaths. And once the bombed out craters were filled, the corpses were buried, the bleeding temporarily mended, our people could find a quiet place to heal as the Earth did. But the trumpets of war sounded once again and a levy was formed of Holocaust survivors, bitter partisans, and naive doughboys from the New World against the Saracen menace. Or that's how I remembered it. But if the Zionists truly wanted peace, why would they choose that God forsaken holy land? A place that suffered from wars of Parthians and Romans, Byzantines and Sassanids, Crusaders and Saracens, Fatimids and Seljuks, and the Ottomans and the British. Anywhere else would have been less violent and entrapping for the Jews. The Hebrew people spent four thousand years rather than forty trying to return to a land filled with people who lived there for three thousand years. And the milk and honey we were promised had been long depleted.

In 1945 the organization known as Nakam, which meant revenge in Hebrew, was born. To complete its task, its founder, Abba Kovner, now 27, would travel to the Palestinian Mandate to gather support from the Zionists there and to gather poison. Once he obtained the poison, Nakam would contaminate the water supplies of Germany. If the old anti-Semitic myths were true, the plan would have been considered cliché. But, when Kovner travelled to the Palestinian Mandate, he found little support. Only Ephraim Katzir, the later President of Israel, and his brother supplied Kovner with poison, although they did not know of Kovner's true intentions. Yet, even with this support, Kovner was not successful. The British found out and Kovner was imprisoned for a few months. Luckily, Kovner's Plan B was more successful. Members of Nakam broke into a Nuremberg internment camp containing SS prisoners and poisoned the bread supply with arsenic. Conflicting reports tell us that either no prisoners died or hundreds died. Either way, Kovner and the organization were satisfied, and after their escapades, the group was disbanded. Abba Kovner, who spent most of his life fighting and killing those who would kill the Jewish people to the point of attempting genocide, now settled in Israel; the supposed sanctum of the Jewish people.

Perhaps I do not know a lot about Israel. I was not born in Europe, and never experienced bigots, pogroms, or extermination. But, I still have eyes and I still have a voice. When I see the Jewish conservatives that claim supremacy over other races and religions, or claim that all Muslims need to be banned from entering this country and the ones that are already here need to be tested for their Islamic extremism, (how can that even be tested?), I start to worry. I worry that after thousands of years of being impoverished, raped, murdered, and almost exterminated, that we have learned nothing. That the same rhetoric used to label us as rats is the same used by some of us to describe Muslims. I worry that there are tests of purity, that non-religious Jews or

Jews of a certain race are less than “true” Jews. Who is a “true” Jew anyway? Likud supporters, Haredi Jews, Liberal Jews, and Socialist Jews would all be killed as the same. Fascism does not care for the flavor of Jew they stomp on. This forceful hierarchy only serves to divide us for a shortsighted sense of superiority. And by ignoring, supporting, or even committing atrocities ourselves against other victimized groups, only serves to degenerate us to the point where there will be no one left to speak for us, because we caused them to die.

Abba Kovner died in 1987, known in Israel not for his partisan campaigns nor his attempt at genocidal retribution, but for his poetry. He won three literary awards in Israel, and seemed to have put his hatred on a shelf. I told my dad the story of Kovner and when I told him the end, when Kovner retired in Israel, he laughed. He found it shocking that such a man wouldn't be held accountable for what he tried to do, but he also claimed that he would probably do the same if he was in Kovner's shoes. He is not unique in that belief. My dad still lives, my Jewish peer who loves his family still lives, I still live, and the Jewish people will always live. It truly is a miracle for which absolutely no one should thank God. This century has been the best it has ever been for the Jewish people, but it was not God who made it so. Our Golden Age comes both from us, but also from our gentile friends, who will always outnumber the bigots. But, it can all be taken away, because thousands of years of progress can be undone in a few unfortunate days.

As for my thoughts on Zionism, I have no clue whether the idea was once sound and was destroyed by contempt and hate, or whether it was always a bad idea from the start. An idea that was supported by racial supremacist beliefs similar to Manifest Destiny or Generalplan Ost. It doesn't really matter anyway. Abba Kovner may have died in 1987, but his hatred lives on. Hatred molded by prejudice thousands of years old, only to inhabit those who were once and still are victims to it. When I see that young conservative Jew talk about the successes of his family, I find solace in our new found freedom. Yet, when I hear him endorse the IDF when it kills the families of Palestinians and their children in the name of “counter-terrorism,” the only thing I can find inside me is fear. A fear that six million gravestones smother in dust; forgotten under the weight of six million more.

וְעַד לְעוֹלָם מְלֻכּוֹתָיו כְּבוֹד שֵׁם קְרוֹיָךְ

"Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever"