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Tragedy in Israel

Those who talk about a two-state solution are living in a world that hasn't existed for a decade. Both sides have hardened to an exclusionary extreme that precludes compromise or coexistence. The events of the last week will ensure that even the embers of those hopes are doused cold.

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JULIA IOFFE

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I've started writing this letter many times before deleting it and starting over, in part because, as I **noted to Peter Hamby** when we recorded our *Powers That Be* podcast last night, saying anything about Israel-Palestine is a recipe for getting yelled at. But mostly, it's because I feel that there is so much to say and also nothing to say at all. Still, I'm going to try. I hope you stick with me to the end, because this is messy and thorny and doesn't lend itself to short, pithy slogans.

I want to start by saying that, like for so many Jews in the world, this is deeply, deeply personal for me. This isn't just because I have friends and relatives in Israel, though I do. (Ironically, many of them are from Moscow: they just fled the war there 18 months ago.) Like so many modern Jews, I am alive because so many of my grandparents, great-grandparents, and

so on up the chain, managed to escape annihilation just in time. Scores and scores didn't. They l
 just talking about the Holocaust, but pogroms, the Crusades, the Khmel'nitsky revolt in Ukraine, t
 launched against Jewish communities all across Europe because someone owed money to a Jew **Q**

We've been driven to near extinction in Europe many times, and the Holocaust was just the latest
 Jews are descended from just 350 people because of a population **bottleneck** that occurred ab
 and it wasn't for happy reasons. And by the way, the reason we were in Christian Europe to begi
 country and kingdom would take turns expelling us—is because, in the first and second centurie
 slaughtered us and kicked us out of the place we were originally from, Judea, and then renamed
 slaughter, the Romans brought 100,000 Jewish slaves from there to ancient Rome, where they w
 the monuments tourists flock to see today. And still, there was a small but continuous presence
 Palestine from then until now.

I say all this not because I don't also value Palestinian life—I do—or because I don't think this pla
 home—I do—but because so many people who are not Jewish do not understand the urgent fee
 many Jews feel about their community. After everything, and especially after the Holocaust kille
 there is not just a sense of fear that something like this can happen again—after all, it always ha
 always balancing on the precipice of extinction. So when 1,000 Jews are killed in a single day—t
 Jews since the end of the Holocaust—it strikes at something very, very deep in me and, I'm sure

We see the photos of people who were killed—who look like they could have been our parents, c
 members—and we feel that we have been pushed that much closer to the abyss of oblivion. (To
 some tribal element in all this would be dishonest, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily malign.
do with those feelings, but more on that in a bit.)

The other reason I mention all this brutal history is because I have been stunned at the level of h
 (Though seeing **Donald Trump, Jr.** post that Hamas would have been “no más” if his dad were pr
 already been president and hadn't already had a chance to make Hamas no más, was something
 concerned by the illiteracy on the left, especially when it comes to the Jewish side of this conflic
 implications for the Democratic Party. The party base, especially its younger and more progressi
 moving steadily on the issue, to a point where now, Democrats are **more sympathetic** to the cause of the Palestinians than
 Israelis, as if it is a zero-sum game.

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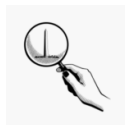
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Two years ago, during the last war between Hamas and Israel, I did a little survey on social media and asked people where
 Jews came from, originally. Most people said “Europe.” It was deeply telling and explained why, in so many narratives I've
 seen proliferate on social media, Jews are considered the white colonizers of Palestinians and people of color. The Jews, in

this narrative, were like the British in Africa, India, and Pakistan: white foreigners who came from brown people and steal their resources. It's a nice, easy narrative that fits perfectly into the conv colonialism and systemic racism. And it's why so many groups on the left have **aligned themsel** Palestinian cause and see Jews as white aggressors.

There's one problem: it's not quite true. It would be if the British were originally from India or Afric years later, to claim it as theirs. In fact, most of these misguided narratives also leave out the rol especially the U.N. in creating the state of Israel—as well as an Arab Palestinian state next to it. rejected, for some understandable reasons, after which neighboring Arab countries attacked the in other words, wasn't a rogue state, but one created and recognized by the international commu existed without it.



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These narratives also completely ignore the fact that not all Jews are white and European. In fac around half the Jewish population, and they include Black Jews and Ethiopian Jews. The Sephar North Africa, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and Syria, are not white, and hundreds and hundreds of thousanc of *their* homes and violently dispossessed by these Muslim countries after 1948 in response to t the dispossession of Palestinians. Do they too have the right of return?

My point here is not to relitigate history or to excuse the actions of the Israeli government, which has pursued an increasingly horrific and dehumanizing policy toward the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, especially under **Bibi Netanyahu**. (In fact, Bibi has always played with violence, provoking it and ratcheting it up in the occupied territories so that he can come down hard and show Israelis, *See? Only I can protect you.*) My point is these incomplete narratives—if I'm to put it diplomatically—erase the Jewish connection to the place. They also erase the value of Jewish life.

We see that kind of erasure, unfortunately, on both sides. Right-wing Israelis claim that Palestinians aren't a real people and that they don't have a right to the land. Left-wing Westerners, often with no ties to the region, say that Jews are white



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colonizers, oppressors who are getting what they deserve. Much of what is being **said** now on this horrific attack is that **this is what decolonization looks like**, with many **reluctant** to criticize the **blame** for it lies solely with Israel, **mocking** the victims and even **reveling** in the violence. (To **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez**, **decried** this as antisemitism.)

I don't know what will happen or what *can* happen to solve this. Those who talk about a two-state world that hasn't existed for a decade. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians seem to want one anymore of their own, a state without the other, and the ethno-nationalism that built Israel—born as it was oppression—has fueled the ethno-nationalism of the Palestinians, born out of the exact same elements hardened to an exclusionary extreme that precludes compromise or coexistence, and the events that even the embers of those hopes are doused cold. Before Saturday, the plan seemed to have worked out—or, if they were Israelis, ignore the problem and their complicity in it. Now, it is to fight to the



The last time Israel and Hamas fought, in 2021, I had many private conversations with people I did not know who held some of the above views. I said that I felt absolutely hopeless about a two-state world that couldn't imagine how—after everything Israelis have done to Palestinians and Palestinians have done to Israelis—live in one country together, serve side by side in one military or one police force.

This was, I was told, colonialist thinking. This was how the British thought about Indians—that there was no room for peace. The Palestinians wanted one state where everyone was equal before the law, not retrial. I don't know how Saturday's massacre and the left's defense of it as a necessary and expected outcome squares with that. I do know that there are now far fewer ears ready to hear it. And after the retrial continues to deliver, I doubt there will be many Palestinians who will want it either. I can't say I blame

I don't know exactly how this ends, nor do I have any hope that it ends well. It had always been full of contradictory truths simultaneously, that these two deeply traumatized peoples both have a real claim to the land, claims that each side **has at times acknowledged** about the other, claims that have been veiled by emotion and trauma and religion and nationalism into dehumanization and heartlessness, into forgetting that Israeli children and Palestinian children both deserve to live and thrive. Now, it will be impossible, at least for the foreseeable future, though, my god, do I wish it weren't so.

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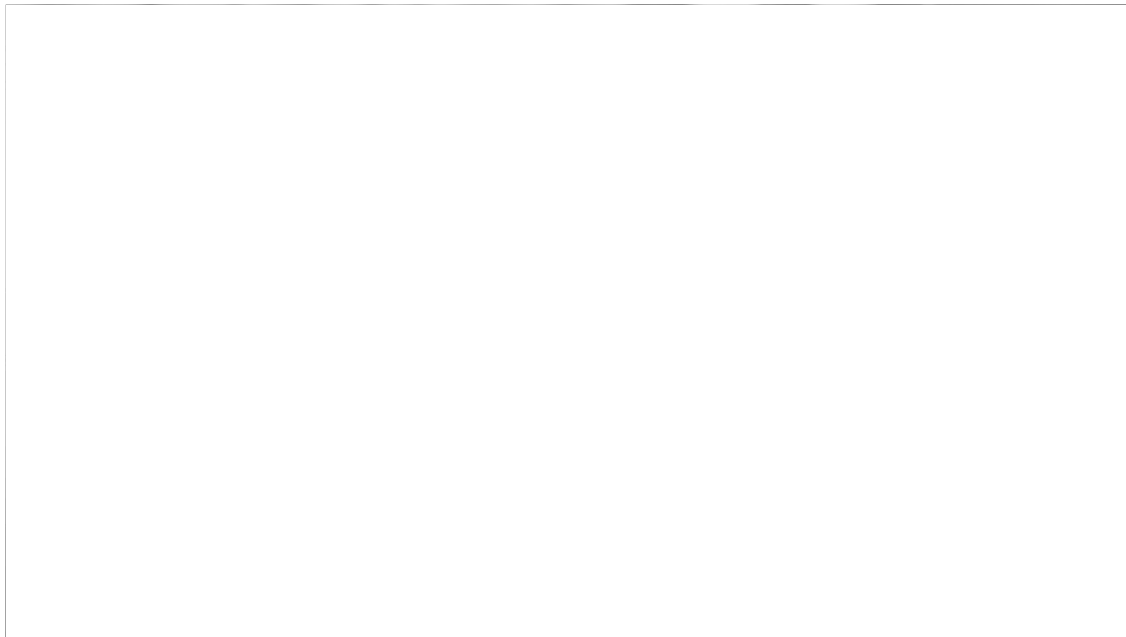
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