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Commentary...

The Real Lesson of Oct. 7? Stop Appealing for Sympathy

By Jonathan S. Tobin

After three years of failure, it's time to try something else. That's the lesson that Jews and those who purport to speak for them and/or the pro-Israel community should be thinking about on the third anniversary of the Oct. 7 massacre.

For three years, the Jewish world has been stunned by the reaction to the Hamas-led Palestinian Arab terror attacks on Israeli communities on Oct. 7, 2023. But it's time to stop. More to the point, it's also necessary to cease appealing for sympathy or understanding.

The expectation on the part of most Jews and Israelis, as well as those who are their friends in the days that followed, was that world opinion would swing behind the Jewish state in the aftermath of that horrific orgy of mass murder, torture, rape, kidnapping and wanton destruction. And there was, in fact, some initial sympathy for Israel, even in the media that is so quick to denounce it.

Within days, however, that changed. Once it was clear that Israelis were not going to simply accept their victimization and would act to end the threat of more such atrocities, what passes for enlightened liberal opinion, along with some elements on the far right, voiced outrage. That outrage was not aimed at the crimes of the Palestinians. Nor was it a response to the evidence that their leaders and most of the population have meant what they said when they repeatedly rejected an independent state alongside Israel and would settle for nothing less than the destruction of the Jewish state.

Instead, the spectacle of Jews defending themselves and moving to eliminate a threat that no sovereign nation would tolerate on its border was too much for a world that has largely regarded Jewish power of any kind as intolerable. Even before the Israel Defense Forces began their offensive into Gaza to attempt to eliminate Hamas's ability to make good on their promises to repeat Oct. 7-style massacres, anti-Israel protests began. More importantly, world leaders called for caution and restraint that they would never demand of their own countries under similar circumstances.

The United States was an initial exception to that rule. Yet within weeks, the administration of President Joe Biden, which had supported Israel's goal of eliminating Hamas, shifted to a more equivocal stance. What ensued was a year-long dance in which the United States sought to pressure the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to stop seeking victory. Washington even demanded that Jerusalem accept an outcome in which the continued hold on power on the part of the Islamist terrorists who had ruled Gaza as an independent Palestinian state in all but name since 2007 was to be tolerated.

Biden's shift was clearly a reaction to liberal and left-wing opinion in his own Democratic Party. After Oct. 7, Democrats, who had already been turning against Israel over the course of the previous decade under the administration of President Barack Obama, overwhelmingly took the side of the Palestinians against the Israelis.

The same was true around the globe as Western European nations—influenced by both the influx of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa, and by Marxist and left-wing parties that reviled Zionism—expressed their horror at the idea of Israel pursuing a war to defeat Hamas.

Israel's foes claim that the revulsion was the product of an unusually harsh and "disproportionate" offensive in Gaza in which its military indiscriminately killed large numbers of civilians, including women and children. The Jewish state was accused of "genocide" and causing mass starvation. Indeed, so ubiquitous were these accusations in mainstream media outlets and popular culture that few liberals or left-wingers dared to question them or consider them debatable.

This critique was—and remains—entirely disingenuous. Israel's military used more restraint in the difficult conditions of urban warfare and, as impartial military experts testified, killed a far lower percentage of civilians than in any other such confrontation in modern-day history.

Hamas hid behind Palestinian civilians and did everything to

expose them to death. They stored weapons in schools and hospitals. They stole food meant for residents that the Israelis moved from one part of the Strip to another to keep them out of the way of airstrikes and other military efforts to bring back men, women and children

dragged by Hamas on Oct. 7 into the coastal enclave. With the international aid it had received prior to Oct. 7, Hamas had built a tunnel network under Gaza that might be termed the world's largest bomb shelter, the size of the New York City subway system. But no civilians (other than the hostages, many of whom were hid there) were allowed into them. They were only for terrorist fighters, their commanders and their supplies.

There was no "genocide" or Gaza famine. There isn't any such thing going on today. Nonetheless, much of the world believes it.

The atrocities of Oct. 7 were denied, even though Hamas and other Palestinian terrorists had documented them with GoPro cameras and social-media uploads (one infamously called his parents to brag about how many Jews he killed that day). The victims, including raped women and men, were ignored or not believed. Posters of the kidnapped, even of a 9-month-old baby, were torn down on the streets of American and European cities. Mass rallies were held to bolster support for Hamas on the streets of those cities and on college campuses.

The main reason for the lack of sympathy for Israel wasn't because Netanyahu or members of his cabinet were unlikable or too truculent, or because his government failed to mount an effective public diplomacy campaign (though it should have done better). Nor was it because pro-Israel supporters in the United States were equally ineffective in making the case for the Jewish state or against intransigent Palestinian Arabs and their terrorist leaders.

The deck was stacked against Israel long before Oct. 7. Like the American education system, the corporate media had largely been captured by left-wing ideologues who believed in political activism, not journalism. And it, too, adopted the skewed ideas of critical race theory, intersectionality and settler-colonialism that exacerbated racial tensions among the general population, as well as falsely labeled Israelis and Jews as "white" oppressors and their Palestinian opponents as "people of color." That meant the former were always in the wrong, no matter what they did, and the latter in the right, no matter how awful their crimes.

While Israel and its supporters might have done better in their efforts to inform the world about Oct. 7 and the century of Palestinian rejectionism that preceded it, the notion that the global audience or even the bulk of the base of the Democratic Party was open to being educated about any of this was unfounded. The red-green alliance of Marxists and Islamists that are skewing European politics and ideas about Israel and the Jews has also secured a beachhead in America, as the success of antisemitic figures like New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and Michigan Democratic U.S. Senate nominee Dr. Abdul El-Sayed demonstrates.

A world that had decided that the Jews and their state were singular villains, and thus guilty of horrible crimes, was certainly influenced by social-media algorithms and biased media. But their receptiveness to the blood libels about genocide and famine in Gaza or to the lie that Israel is an "apartheid" state wasn't due to the lack of a proactive information task force in the Israeli prime minister's office or the failure of much of the organized Jewish world. Having been marinated in the toxic doctrines that taught them the Israelis were the bad guys, liberal opinion was already lost to the Jewish state even before the bodies were buried after Oct. 7.

The only sectors of global or American society that remain impervious, or at least less vulnerable, to the onslaught of Hamas propaganda masquerading as progressivism are among those on the right who have already rejected these doctrines. That's provided that they are not also being seduced by the wave of Jew-hatred on the far right that employs traditional antisemitic tropes.

Once we acknowledge all of this, the question remains: What do we do about it?

The first thing is for the Jews to stop appealing for sympathy that isn't coming.

It should have been apparent from the outset that centering pro-Israel advocacy on the victimization of Jews on Oct. 7 or on the appalling treatment of the hostages taken that day was a mistake. It

only excited antisemites. And, rather than elicit empathy, it seems to have convinced many others to believe that the Palestinians had a good reason to murder the Jews.

In this sense, it was much like Israel's misguided and failed efforts to trade "land for peace" throughout the previous three decades. That did more to convince world opinion that the Jews were possessors of stolen property, rather than high-minded people who were willing to compromise their rights and even their security to achieve an end to the conflict. But now, the pleas for understanding seem only to have reinforced the growing chorus of those who believe Zionism—the anti-colonial and national liberation movement of the Jews—equals racism.

Unlike the recent past, the real debate about the Middle East isn't about a two-state solution the Palestinians never wanted. It now centers on whether all of the Jewish state, including the kibbutzim and other communities near the Gaza Strip whose liberal-minded inhabitants were slaughtered along with everyone else on Oct. 7, is stolen land. That goes hand in hand with the idea that its occupants are foreign colonizers in their homeland, where they are the indigenous people who are only getting what they deserve.

Rather than members of the Jewish community wracking their brains trying to solve the puzzle about how to convince those who aren't listening to hear sound historical arguments, they need to stop centering so much of their efforts on this futile quest.

It's true that losses in the information world have real consequences, and that the attempts to isolate Israel diplomatically and economically pose a grave danger to it. But if the Jews should have learned anything in the last century when the world stood by as the Holocaust went on for years, it's that the most important task facing them is to strengthen their state and its ability to defend Jewish life.

As horrible as the catastrophe of Oct. 7 was, in the three years that have followed, Israel's defeats of Hamas and Hezbollah—plus the fall of a longtime brutal dictator in Syria—and their Iranian paymasters and sponsors have done more to make Jewish lives safer than all of the clever arguments put forward by its most able public information advocates.

That doesn't give the Israeli government—or Diaspora leaders and groups—a pass for doing so poorly at explaining the situation. And it certainly doesn't excuse a tech-savvy Jewish state for not being as nimble as it should have been in employing new media and Internet technologies to make their arguments against those spreading blood libels and antisemitism.

Still, delusions should be discarded about the chances that appeals aimed at inspiring sympathy for Jewish victims will move the needle on international or even American public opinion for those who have bought the pro-Hamas narrative hook, line and sinker. As Dara Horn has written, the world may "love dead Jews," but what that really means for us today is that their abhorrence of Jews with power is undiminished.

What Israel and its defenders must exude is strength, confidence in their justice of their cause, and a willingness to be undaunted by the lies and smears spread about them. Rather than seeking to debate or persuade those crying "genocide" primarily to give the world a pass for permitting the actual genocide of European Jewry during the Holocaust, we must dismiss them as hate-mongers unworthy of intellectual refutations.

As much as Jews everywhere must continue to mourn the victims of Oct. 7, as well as the heroic soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces who fell or were wounded in the ongoing effort to defeat terrorists, they should quit waiting for others to join them.

The real lesson of Oct. 7 is no different from that of the thousands of years of Jewish history that preceded it. Weakness and faith in the kindness of those ready to believe that Jews are the cause of whatever it is they fear most or the greatest societal problems they face is a formula for disaster.

Just as in the past, those who think that destroying the Jewish state will be the first step toward the liberation of the world's oppressed peoples are not persuadable. But they can be defeated.

A proud declaration of Jewish rights and faith is far more likely to inspire friendship and alliances. That's a lesson that should resonate for Israelis. But it must also be one adopted by Diaspora Jews perplexed by a wave of bigotry and vitriol they never anticipated and struggle to cope with. Unless and until they realize that they must defend themselves first—and worry about what everyone else thinks later—will they find a way to live in a world where Jew-hatred has again become fashionable. (JNS Oct 5)

After October 7, 'Never Again' Isn't By Marc Belzberg

For most of my life, I believed in two words. Like so many of my generation, I grew up on Never Again: a vow built from the ashes of the Holocaust, repeated at every memorial and every Holocaust Remembrance Day. I thought it was a guarantee.

On October 7, 2023, that guarantee broke. Some 1,200 people were murdered in a single morning, and 251 were taken hostage. It was the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. We learned, at a price no one should ever have to pay, that Never Again is a hope. Saying it cannot make it true.

So as we approach the third anniversary, I want to suggest that we say something different. We are not in a position to promise the world what will never happen to us. But we can promise one another what we will do. We will never forget. And no one will be left alone.

We already know what "alone" costs. Many Holocaust survivors lost entire families and then found no one to help them carry it. There were no support groups and no language for trauma, so they rebuilt their lives and said nothing. Many spoke about whom they had lost only near the end of their lives, and their children grew up in that silence. We can make sure that never again is a bereaved family left to grieve alone.

I say this as someone who has spent 25 years in the company of grief. In August 2001, our daughter Michal was 12 and preparing for her bat mitzvah in Jerusalem when a suicide bomber struck the Sbarro restaurant, killing 15 people.

Michal canceled her celebration and gave the money to the victims' families. As we got to know those families, we saw their needs went far beyond the first weeks. No one, anywhere in the world, was providing long-term care for victims of terror. That gap became OneFamily.

Here is the most important thing those 25 years have taught me: grief does not get smaller on a schedule. The world imagines that healing moves in a straight line, with each year a little lighter than the last. In fact, trauma comes in waves.

The third year is often among the hardest. The funerals are over, and the meals have stopped arriving. The people who called every week now call on the anniversary, if they call at all. This is when a widow finally faces the paperwork she could not bear to open. It is when a teenager who held himself together for his mother starts to come apart.

Since October 7, more than 1,600 families have joined OneFamily's circle of bereaved families, along with 316 new widows and widowers and 37 twins who lost their twin brother or twin sister.

In three years, we have taken under our care more bereaved families than we did in the 22 years before. We are caring for and supporting more than 5,300 children, teens, and young adults, and more than 3,200 bereaved parents. To meet that need, our annual budget has grown nearly fivefold since 2022.

Behind each number is a home that has stopped working. A mother who no longer cooks, because setting the table means facing the empty chair. A father who can't focus at work. Parents so consumed by the son they lost that the children still at home begin to feel invisible. Capable adults who can no longer get through the day.

Bereavement is not only sorrow. It is the slow collapse of ordinary life, and it rarely shows from the outside.

That is why I believe our collective responsibility has grown since October 7, not shrunk. This is not only Israel's burden. It belongs to the whole Jewish people, in Jerusalem and Johannesburg, in Toronto and Tel Aviv, in New York and Netivot. Recovering from October 7 will take generations of work as a community and as worldwide Jewry: to learn, to remember, to see the pain of others, to lean in and care, and to heal.

The greatest danger now is not that we will forget October 7. It is that we will get used to it.

After three years of sirens, headlines, and funerals, even the kindest heart builds calluses. The days of remembrance ahead are our chance to peel them back and feel again. Learn one name and its story. Call the family you have been meaning to call. Support the unglamorous, long-term work of the therapists and volunteers who stay after the cameras leave.

We have learned what helps. OneFamily's approach is built on principles drawn from Option B, the book Sheryl Sandberg wrote with psychologist Adam Grant after the sudden death of her husband. They are all important, but three of them matter most: First, people need to know they are not alone. Second, the most helpful support comes from those who have suffered a similar loss. Third, meeting someone farther along the same road gives hope that today's acute grief will not last forever.

So we bring widows together with widows, parents with parents, orphans with orphans. In a room with people who truly understand each other, the bereaved find words for what they could not say anywhere else.

I have seen what this looks like when it works. Widows who came to us after the Second Intifada now sit with young women widowed in 2024 and say, simply, I know. I'm here. Children who grew up in our programs now mentor children who lost a parent in Gaza or on the Lebanese border. What began as care received has become care given, full circle, again and again. That is the answer I can offer to the broken promise of Never Again: Never alone.

We will come through this stronger. I believe that completely. But strength does not mean the pain is gone. It means we carry it together. We can emerge grieving but strong, missing the people we love but full of love. That is not a slogan. It is work, and it belongs to all of us. (Jerusalem Post Oct 6)

The Prophet By Liel Leibovitz

One morning, longer ago now than I care to admit, I found myself on a train headed to Harvard. I was working on a book about Leonard Cohen, and was told by a number of people that I absolutely had to speak with the acclaimed scholar Ruth Wisse, who had known Cohen decades earlier in Montreal and helped him publish his first collection of poems.

I put off reaching out to Wisse for as long as I could, because Wisse, to be perfectly frank, intimidated me: not because she wrote with such elegance and eloquence about so many things but because, when she did, she was right about everything.

When so many, myself included, swooned at the prospect of peace with the Palestinians, Wisse thundered against the Oslo Accords, observing that, precisely 50 years after the death factory in Auschwitz kicked into high gear, the Jews were yet again facing an existential peril—this time of their own making, courting a terrorist organization, the PLO, that made no qualms about its desire to exterminate the last of them.

When trendy thinkers heralded, sometime in the 1990s, the end of history and the forever triumph of the liberal order, Wisse argued that Western liberalism was weak and unprincipled and all too willing to sidle up to those eager to destroy it.

When hip and hopeful young Jews dismissed antisemitism as a problem that may have plagued their grandparents but would surely surge no more, Wisse explained that the world's oldest hatred was merely dressing up for its terrifying next act, soon to be ushered in by a maddening and vile coalition of leftists and Islamists.

She was even spot on about the excesses of feminism: The movement's Marxist framing and push to devalue stay-at-home parenting in favor of dual-career households, she wrote presciently in 1988, "has done to the American home what communism did to the Russian economy, and most of the ruin is irreversible. By defining relations between men and women in terms of power and competition instead of reciprocity and cooperation, the movement tore apart the most basic and fragile contract in human society, the unit from which all other social institutions draw their strength."

Reading Wisse's warnings, I wanted none of them to be true. As a young man, I found the progressive sales pitch much more appealing, a vision of a world powered by good intentions and gently rolling toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. But the more I paid attention, the more I realized that Wisse's pronouncements were profound and correct, and, also, that she was largely alone in making them. Other thinkers may have agreed with some of her positions, and some delivered equally compelling arguments, but none could convey a vision so clearly, sweepingly, and compellingly as Wisse. She stood alone, grappling, I suspected as I got off the train that morning in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the kind of loneliness that Isaiah and Jeremiah probably knew all too well, the feeling of being respected and feared and largely ignored because you told the truth and the truth was rarely comforting.

She was always struck by a line of Alexander Pope she had read in college, explaining that a writer's true goal was to state what everyone knows to be true but is too afraid to say. "True wit is nature to advantage dress'd," Pope wrote, "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd."

If you achieve that, Wisse added, it may be called prophecy. For her, though, "it was merely saying the obvious."

Sometime in the early 2000s, I finally made my way to Wisse's Harvard office and knocked on the door. She welcomed me warmly, took the bottle of vodka I had brought as a token of my gratitude for

her time, poured us both generous servings in chipped coffee mugs, and began to talk. She talked about Canadian Jewish history, about Yiddish literature, about leftist politics, about Leonard Cohen's talents and his frivolities, and about how both somehow made his allure even greater.

I was awestruck by Cohen. Wisse never was. Even as a college student, she let no man relieve her of the burden of what she knew was absolutely right. Cohen, she observed in an essay for *Commentary* in 1995, was terrific and talented, but, especially as a younger man, too inclined to let himself be drawn into the pleasures and empty promises of his fame.

"While Leonard as a working artist did not let himself be destroyed," Wisse wrote, "he was gradually changed by substances that affect the character of a man along with his mind. A Cohen—a true member of the priesthood—has the obligation to remain unblemished, no matter what forms of impurity are rampant in the land. Not every Cohen fulfills his priestly destiny, but none can fulfill it who does not adhere to the priestly code."

And that's just what Wisse sounds like when she speaks, much more like a poet writing some epic work in her head than like a scholar reflecting coldly and analytically on the past. When she hit on a point that gave her pause—lamenting, for example, the Jewish readiness to embrace people who are clearly their foes—her eyes lit up and her voice grew steely, as if she weren't a diminutive professor of Yiddish literature but a general poised on the cusp of some great battle on which history itself depended. Overwhelmed by drink and ideas and the weight of the late afternoon sunlight, I eventually grew tired and slowed down. Wisse never did.

Nor, I hope, will she ever. Sitting recently around her dining room table on the Upper East Side, enjoying some fruit and cookies, Wisse, having not long ago celebrated her 90th birthday, is still the great and energetic teacher who speaks in long, elegant phrases and who delivers short and steely punctuations designed to remind her students that the ideas under discussion aren't theoretical flights of fancy but blueprints for a better future, to be dismissed at great peril.

And Wisse knows all about the risks of failing to heed history's warning signs. She was born in Czernowitz—then in Romania, now in Ukraine—in 1936, when the city was still known as Jerusalem on the Prut. By the time Wisse turned 4, however, her parents realized it was time to flee, and fast. They landed in Canada, where young Ruth excelled in school and found herself drawn to the great Yiddish poets—Rokhl Korn, Melech Ravitch, Itzik Manger—refugees from her parents' smoldering world, who came by for dinner and a reading. In their words, she found more than beauty: She found a major philosophical project.

"Yiddish literature," she told me, "is the history of Jewish mistakes. You see where excess of investment in the goodness of others becomes a mistake. You don't ever want to put a limit on the goodness in yourself, but you must never anticipate the goodness of others."

Wisse earned her Ph.D. from McGill University in Montreal, joined its faculty, established its program for Yiddish literature, and became known as one of the world's leading scholars on the subject. She then moved to Harvard in 1993, spending two decades there as a professor of Yiddish literature and comparative literature. But side by side with her scholarship, she felt another urge rumbling.

"Every scholar of Yiddish literature faces deep political challenges," she said, and so it was to political questions that Wisse increasingly turned her attention. And in 1992, she published a short book titled *If I Am Not for Myself: The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews*.

Pick it up today—it was rereleased this year in a gorgeous edition with a new introduction from Wisse herself, largely because its insights feel not just timely but urgent—and you'll be forgiven for thinking that the book was published last month rather than a third of a century ago.

It's tempting, particularly in the current political climate, to quote the book at great length, because it puts its finger, accurately and without a trace of sentimentality, on the very same problems still plaguing us today and still, sadly, difficult for many Jews to properly understand. "Liberals," Wisse observed, "trust that all human problems are amenable to negotiated solutions, that all people are united in a spirit of brotherhood, and that history itself is a record of progress. They detest the use of force, not only for the damage it causes but because by admitting the limits of reason it throws humankind back to a more primitive stage of civilization."

What, then, happens when the Arabs attack the Jews and push them into forceful self-defense? "The modern Jew," Wisse wrote, "is thus resaddled with the double burden he has carried through all but a

fraction of recent centuries; in becoming the target of the most determined aggressors, he unwittingly aggresses against the liberal faith. Because his enemy wants his extinction, he becomes an affront to those who insist on tolerance and pacification. The hatred that Jews inspire among their enemies—for compelling political reasons—reminds liberals that enmity is real and that it has great generative energy. No one is grateful to the Jews for this reminder.”

Which leaves the Jews between a rock and a hard place. The normal human reaction, Wisse conceded, is to plead for sympathy, which is why American Jewish organizations, say, invest in Holocaust education. But that is a mistake: Observing Jewish weakness, Wisse thundered, people derive only that “(a) Jews are an easy target; (b) something must be wrong with the Jews if they were selected as a target; (c) it is not a good idea to be a Jew. Since innocence was not a shield against destruction in the first place, it is hard to see how advertising innocence will do any better.”

This reflection guided Wisse to what is arguably her greatest work, the brief but masterful *Jews and Power*, published in 2007. It opens with a harrowing anecdote: Nazi soldiers are roughing up a Jewish boy in Warsaw in 1939. His mother, rushing to her bruised son’s side, places his cap back on his head and tells him to be a mensch, or an honorable human being. Which, Wisse explains, is about as pure a distillation as we can find of a profound—and profoundly ruinous—Jewish attitude that focuses on one’s personal moral conduct rather than on the gritty demands of communal survival and self-defense. One would never retroactively blame the mother in the story for not telling her son to fight back or to run away to preserve his own life; to her, as to many other Jews, there was no nobler goal than behaving in a decent and commendable fashion, even in the face of extinction. But those of us who know the fate of that mother and son are obliged to learn from it.

Wisse called the mother’s way of being in the world “moral solipsism,” a reckoning, Wisse explained in the book, “that is preoccupied with its own performance to the exclusion of everyone else’s.” Identifying the Jewish unwillingness to take power seriously and wield it effectively, she continued, led their enemies to spot an opportunity. Wilhelm Marr, the 19th-century German politician who coined the term “antisemitism” and rode it to popularity, for example, accused the Jews of plotting to seize political power precisely because he realized they lacked the will to do so.

What began as a necessity—Jews developing strategies to accommodate, appease, and attract the far more powerful nations that hosted them—soon, Wisse argued, hardened into a virtue in its own sake, the delusion that the Jew we must applaud most enthusiastically is not the one armed and ready to defend his home but the one eager to listen to and embrace even, or particularly, his hungriest predators.

And this delusion hardly subsided once the Jews came into a state of their own.

“Wielding military strength,” Wisse wrote in *Jews and Power*, “Israel changed the Jewish political equilibrium in contradictory ways. The options of self-defense that Israel acquired by establishing its own military and intelligence made Jews for the first time in 2,000 years a potentially valuable ally, including of the world’s superpower, the United States.” At the same time, however, those who despised both Jews and democracy greatly magnified Israel’s importance in the international arena, presenting it as a power-hungry predator determined to oppress its Arab and Muslim neighbors without bothering to note that these neighbors were far greater in number or admit that they were habitually the aggressors themselves.

It’s hardly a surprise, then, that so many Jews opted to resolve this dissonance by turning to that old chestnut, powerlessness, declaring themselves opposed to the engine of Jewish self-defense and self-determination, Zionism.

You’d think that the writer and thinker who had issued all these prescient prophecies would feel despondent these days, as her previous cathedral, Harvard, is seized, alongside most American universities, by thugs waving the banners of Hamas and Hezbollah, and as her city, New York, is governed by precisely the sort of antisemite she had spent decades warning us about. Wisse, after all, has spoken publicly about contemplating suicide in the run-up to the Oslo Accords, not in despair but as a desperate warning against an act of national suicide.

Perhaps she opted to stay alive to keep delivering the truths that we needed to hear. And hear them we did: In addition to her books, Wisse also penned a large number of searing op-eds in publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, with headlines such as “Harvard Is an Islamist Outpost” and “The Cost of Kindness to the Cruel in Gaza.”

The challenges these days may be many and considerable, but Wisse no longer feels alone, in part because she has, in the decades

since Oslo, put up generations of students, like Aaron Lansky, who founded the Yiddish Book Center, or the writer Dara Horn, who pursue the great teacher’s themes and ideas with vigor and courage drawn straight from the source.

Besides, Wisse said, our particular moment in time is clarifying: Instead of the idyllic illusions of the 1990s, we’ve something much closer to sobriety, with more and more people realizing that the threat we’re facing is aimed at a bigger target.

“We are trying to get Americans to understand that this is not about the Jews,” she explained as she spoke of the Jew-hating radicals ascendant in the Democratic Party and elsewhere. Propagandists like Zohran Mamdani, she expounded, obsess over Jews as a deflection: Having no good solutions to real-world problems, they do what antisemites had done for centuries and focus shrilly and doggedly on the Jews. And that is a problem not only for the Jews, but for America at large.

“They are anti liberal, and they are aggressive, and their whole energy is in destruction,” Wisse argued. “Because the Jews represent the difficulty of living within a liberal democracy, of engaging in capitalist competition and cooperation, in taking risks, in believing in private property, in believing in freedom. These are all difficult ideas.” And advocating destruction is much easier. But destruction, thankfully, also has a much shorter shelf life, particularly when it comes from advocates of an ideology that is so profoundly anti-American, like the religious animosity professed by so many radical Islamists in public life.

“We are not fighting antisemitism,” Wisse stated, her eyes bright and her voice strong and commanding. “We are fighting jihad. Every time you go out, and you see these people, you should have a thousand people there with cards that say: no jihad in New York, no jihad in America.”

Which, of course, is a very long way away from the conduct of the current Jewish communal leadership, much of which still clings to the lingua franca of diversity, equity, and inclusion, refusing either to point out the problem with the jihadist left or to organize effectively against it.

To get our point across, Wisse continued, we must stop looking for comity where it doesn’t exist and instead—one of her favorite words—aggress. “We must fight,” she said, “against those who come to destroy us.”

And it’s precisely this idea—that we still can, and must, fight—that gives Wisse hope.

Not, mind you, of the googly-eyed kind, but of the kind that, deeply rooted in the Bible, knows the blessings are always more powerful than curses. And if we focus on blessing Israel, Wisse added—making sure, say, that not a week goes by in which we don’t celebrate Israel’s achievements in some way—we’ll prevail. And Wisse, in the fine tradition of Israel’s prophets, offers not only warnings and encouragements but also a blueprint for action: Recently, she encouraged young American Jews to serve, much like Israelis serve, but in “the army of words”—to fight politically, debate on campuses, and persuasively defend our values. “You’ve got to stay on top of it,” she stressed in a steady, reserved tone, “and you know how one trains? We don’t train for defensive warfare.”

You’re free, of course, to dismiss Wisse’s optimism as misguided. You can argue that the enemies are too many, the challenges too great, and the hour too late. But do that, Wisse argued, and you’d be missing the key point of Jewish history. Earlier this year, Wisse delivered the Jefferson Lecture, the highest honor America confers on its artists, intellectuals, and visionaries. And she used that esteemed platform—previously occupied by Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, Arthur Miller, Martin Scorsese, and other luminaries—to remind her listeners of the profound strangeness of Judaism’s seminal prayer, the Shema. The words we recite twice daily, she said, are light in content and heavy in instruction. They remind us that we’re obliged to live publicly as Jews, and to work tirelessly in this world to uphold the traditions and ideals that have always set us apart and have always thrust us forward, even when confronted with formidable, genocidal enemies.

“Some days,” she said, “you think, ‘oh my God, this looks hopeless.’ But we know that we are still winning. That is what it means to be in a free country, in a free environment—it means to have options. And this is a great privilege in Jewish history, and in human history. It’s a great privilege.”

I asked the prophet—a term she resents—what was next. It didn’t take long for her to deliver her verdict.

“I believe that Americans will maintain this precious republic,” she said, “though not without hard work ahead.” (Tablet Sep 30)