

# The Road to a Second Kristallnacht

“This moral shattering did not happen overnight. It was years in the making.”

By BRET STEPHENS

*SAPIR Editor-in-Chief Bret Stephens was awarded the World Jewish Congress’s Teddy Kollek Award for the Advancement of Jewish Culture in New York on November 9, 2023. Previous winners of the award include filmmaker Ken Burns and violinist Itzhak Perlman. This is an edited transcript of Bret’s remarks.*

I’ve always been fond of a line from George Orwell: “To see what’s in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.” It sums up the job of a newspaper columnist.

My colleagues in the news department, the reporters and editors and bureau chiefs there, are in the business of *revealing*—of revealing what’s new, what’s different, what you didn’t know the day before.

Those of us who work on the opinion desk are largely in the business of *reminding*—of reminding readers of what they once knew or should have known, applying those reminders to new cases, giving them fresh expression. That’s the business I’m in.

We’re now in a season of reminders, and it’s fitting that this ceremony takes place on the 85th anniversary of Kristallnacht. We commemorate the event not because, in and of itself, it represents a particularly great tragedy: Ninety-one or so murdered that night is almost minor in the long history of Jewish calamities, including what befell us last month.

We commemorate Kristallnacht, rather, for what it presaged and for what it symbolized.

What it presaged was the impending destruction of European Jewry. What it symbolized was the shattering of a moral order that might have prevented their destruction. Kristallnacht was more than a pogrom in the heart of supposedly civilized Europe. It was the signal that all the old categories—decency, order, fairness, justice, reason—no longer applied. Broken glass was a reminder of how brittle the barrier between civilization and barbarism could be.

This moral shattering did not happen overnight. It was years in the making. It first required the preparation of the public mind to accept that anything was permissible when it came to the Jews. And anything was permissible because, as Joseph Goebbels insisted, “the Jews are guilty.”

Guilt first, crime second—like the Queen of Hearts’s “sentence first, verdict afterwards” in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*—is the essence of the inverted logic on which all antisemitism rests.

We are now witnessing, on a daily and even hourly basis, and on a scale only a few of us thought possible just a few years ago, the same kind of moral and logical inversions; the same “heads-I-win, tails-you-lose” sleight-of-hand reasoning; the same denying to Jews the feelings and rights granted to everyone else; the same preparing of the public mind for another open season on the Jews.

You see it everywhere, right here, in front of our noses.

- Israel is told it has a “right” to self-defense—and that every conceivable means of self-defense amounts to a war crime.
- Israel is sternly warned not to “re-occupy” Gaza in the wake of the present war—even after it was previously accused of continuing to “occupy” Gaza long after it had stopped occupying any part of it in 2005.
- Israel is told not to “blockade” Gaza by depriving it of fuel, electricity, and other goods—even after it was accused for years of blockading Gaza when fuel, electricity, and other goods flowed.
- Israel is expected to stop building or to dismantle settlements in the West Bank for the sake of a Palestinian state—and then told that the kibbutzim whose members were slaughtered last month were also “settlements.”

- Israel is asked to give Palestinian civilians time to flee Gaza before its military campaign begins—and then denounced for creating a “nakba” by forcing Palestinians to flee their homes.
- Israel is told that it must scrupulously abide by the laws of war—even as the wanton murder, rape, and kidnapping of Israelis is treated as a legitimate form of “resistance.”

And then there are the absurdities that Americans are supposed to swallow.

- We are told that “From the River to the Sea” is a call for the creation of a Palestinian state, without any mention that it is principally a call for the destruction of the Jewish state.
- We are told that we must hold Israel to a high moral standard because it’s a democracy, and that we should also denounce it because it’s an apartheid state.
- We are told that we should support calls for “Free Palestine,” and that the vehicle for doing so is a Hamas regime that has stripped Palestinians of every civil and human right, not least by treating them as cannon fodder or human shields in its theocratic death struggle against democratic Israel.

And then, the greatest lie of all: that Israel—the victim of one of the greatest massacres in memory, the proportional equivalent of sixteen 9/11s by American standards, an atrocity that would have been 10 or 100 times worse if the perpetrators had been given the means and opportunity—is, in fact, the real aggressor, the real perpetrator.

The perpetrator, on account of all its alleged crimes before October 7, which meant it got what was coming. And the perpetrator, for having the gall to fight back.

No matter what, Israel is guilty, because Israel, like the Jew of Goebbels’s imagination, is definitionally guilty, guilty from birth. The only remedy for guilt from birth is death. Anti-Zionism, an openly eliminationist ideology that is indistinguishable from antisemitism except that it hides itself better, is now a mainstream, respectable view. Respectable on college

campuses. Respectable in newspaper offices. Respectable in so many other places that define our culture. If, like me, you believe that politics lies downstream from culture, it won't be long before anti-Zionism also takes hold on campaign trails, in legislatures, in all the other institutions of state.

We are already at the point where the pro-Palestinian movement has become openly pro-Hamas; where the reaction to the murder of Jews is euphoria; where the more Jews are killed, the more it is taken as evidence of the perfidy of the Jews themselves.

This is the road back to Kristallnacht.

It is important to call all of this out—to point, again and again, to the illogic, the fabrications, the reversals of causality, that go into the conspiracy theory that is anti-Zionism. We must expose the intellectual sloppiness and moral slipperiness that occurs when retaliation is conflated with aggression, when deliberate murder is treated as the moral equivalent of manslaughter, when raw casualty figures are treated as substitutes for comparative culpability, when the matter of intent is deleted from the equation of justice.

Yet, as important as it is to see what is in front of our noses, it's equally important to stop holding our noses.

We Jews have been holding our noses for quite some time when it comes to the private schools and universities to which we send our children or grandchildren; to the media we read, watch and hear; to the institutions we support through our philanthropy. I won't name names; you know them anyway. We have wagered that it is better to have influence on the inside than to complain from the outside. But if that influence has achieved anything of real value, it's difficult to see it in this degraded mainstream culture in which Jews increasingly feel alone and afraid.

Now we face a two-front challenge. The first, a frontal battle against the forces gathering to destroy the State of Israel and all those who support it. For Diaspora Jews, this is a battle we won't have to fight militarily, for which we can thank our brothers, sisters, and cousins in Israel. But we do have an obligation to fight it politically, institutionally, financially, culturally.

The second challenge, a much more patient and expensive effort, is to create new institutions—new private schools and universities, new news media, new publishing houses, new think tanks, new prize committees, a new ecosystem of thought and creativity and culture—to provide an alternative, and ultimately a replacement, to the rotted-out places that we’re at last starting to leave behind.

In this sense, the award you are giving me is aptly named. Teddy Kollek, for all he did in his long career, will be remembered for two things: standing for an undivided Jerusalem, united and held together by Israeli arms; and promoting, within that city, a diverse, boisterous, and flourishing culture, open to all so long as they came in peace.

These are things worth protecting and upholding today: an Israel whose strength and moral confidence protect not only the lives of its people but also the free and vibrant society within it; an America that does not succumb to the same kind of moral disorder that occurred a century ago, when hatred of the Jews became the vehicle for the destruction of all liberal value—of which the shattered glass of Kristallnacht became so emblematic.

That’s the task that falls on all of us tonight. And it’s a task we begin by seeing what’s in front of our nose.

BRET STEPHENS is the editor-in-chief of Sapir.

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