

Is it the end of a Jewish Golden Age?

I refuse to believe that we are destined to slip down the ladder and into the abyss rung by rung – a response to Franklin Foer

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A star of David carved into a rock wall window on the grounds of the Mt. Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem. (iStock)

When asked about the significance of his music in light of 9-11, Bob Dylan quoted the poem “Gentlemen-Rankers” by Rudyard Kipling:

We have done with Hope and Honour, we are lost to Love
and Truth,
We are dropping down the ladder rung by rung,
And the measure of our torment is the measure of our
youth.
God help us, for we knew the worst too young!

It is ironic that the great Jewish poet of our age measured the toll of a global tragedy through the lens of a philosemitic British poet of the past who might have reveled in the anti-Jewish chaos of our own day.

Let's not deny the facts. For those of us who remember 9-11, the five months after 7-10 have felt sickeningly familiar. Despite the bravery and resilience we see all around us, we are dropping down the ladder rung by rung.

Hamas' intransigence and manipulation in dog and pony show negotiations, the hell of the hostages, the humanitarian disaster of non-combatant civilians trapped by Hamas' ploys and Israel's self-defense, the massive uptick in antisemitic words and acts, and – no matter where you hold politically – the reeking cynicism and incompetence of Israel's ruling coalition all mark step

after step to the bottom of the ladder.

There is a lot of apocalyptic talk online and at Shabbat tables these days about the end of days – for Israel, for the Jewish people – or at least an end of the Golden Age of the Jews as framed by a much-discussed article by Franklin Foer in the *The Atlantic*.

Foer's essay is an important catalog of frightening trends. Most chilling are descriptions of antisemitic violence perpetrated by dunderheads whose false binaries of right and wrong from Berkeley to Montreal to Boston are making simply being a Jew in school – 2nd grade, 11th grade, college, medical school – a living nightmare.

Foer traces today's explosion of Jew hatred to 9-11 within a broad spiral of thousands of years of similar patterns, and focuses on the rise and fall of a pantheon of Jewish figures in pop culture, politics, the humanities, and more in which the Baby Boomers are the golden gods of Jewish success. Boomers define Jewish and American culture, and in some cases world culture too. Influence and achievement refers not only to people like Bob Dylan and Barbra Streisand now pushing eighty, but Einstein and Oppenheimer and Golda Meir in the generation before them and Jerry Seinfeld in the generation that followed half a step later. This Golden Age cavalcade of Jewish stars in entertainment as well as business, science, and law, parallels the miraculous emergence of

Israel, which newly established a home for the Jews and rose up as a cause celebrated by cultural icons of the era, from MLK to John Wayne.

Despite chronic trouble between Israel and its neighbors, Foer explains, classical antisemitism in post-World War II Golden Age America became distinctly fringe and uncool, limited to whack white supremacists, neo-Nazis, nascent Fox Newsists, and other bad actors on the right. Then came 9-11, he says, followed by the financial crash of 2008, Trumpism and Soros libels and Charlottesville and an intersectorian woke revolution in academe poisoning the waters of the perception of Jews from the left, resulting in the tsunami of hate dumped into an entire ecosystem like raw sewage after October 7.

Franklin Foer has written a sobering, thoughtful, powerful chronology, but I take issue with his calling the era in which I grew up a Golden Age of Judaism. I'm fifty-four. We had some good times back then with The Brady Bunch and MTV and Michael Jordan and Clinton-Gore, but in my eyes, it wasn't a Golden Age for the Jews. The Golden Age is now.

I love Bob Dylan and Paul Simon and Lenny Bruce and Gloria Steinem and Barry Levinson and Barbra Streisand and thirtysomething as much as the next guy. (More than most, actually; I even wrote a book about that world). But the Jewishness of the Jews of the so-called Golden Age

was more like lead than gold for me. It might have tickled a collective sense of belonging that Marv Levy coached the Bills and Joe Lieberman almost became Vice President of the United States, but the Jewish practice and purpose I grew up with was deracinated and boring. My strongest memory of the sanctuary in my childhood Conservative synagogue was the extraordinary height of the ceiling, the uncomfortable seats, hating wearing a tie twice a year, and the rancor of the rabbi's sermon, which seemed to last for hours as I fiddled with the Tetris feature on my digital watch.

After eight years of Hebrew School, I didn't know about birkat hamazon, the amidah, the Talmud, or kashrut. I had to memorize my bar mitzvah portion phonetically, and I got out of there as fast as I could and didn't look back until my early twenties. This narrative is identical to that of almost all of my Jewish friends growing up, except that very few of them ever looked back at Judaism at all – at least not until October 7. Most have spent the past few decades being wonderful people doing wonderful things while living distinctly assimilated lives.

My Jewish Golden Age started as it did for many of my Jewishly engaged peers as an undergraduate when I met a Jewish studies teacher who actually treated me as a thinking Jewish person for the first time in my life. This led to coming to Israel, which led to discovering endless troves of Jewish text at institutions like the Conservative

Yeshiva and Pardes, Israeli co-travelers at Elul and Alma, the music of Ehud Banai, the Leader Minyan, mastering Hebrew, living the Shabbat life, and then turning all of this into a career tethering between the Golden Medina and Medinat Yisrael.

One hundred years ago Ahad Ha'am described an import/export model of Jewish culture, and I still believe in it. Israel and the Diaspora, particularly North America, depend on an exchange of ideas – traditional and liberal, sectarian and pluralist, particularist and universal – and all of the ritual, cultural, spiritual, political forms in which those ideas appear serve both poles of Jewish life.

I firmly believe there would be no Hadar or Romemu or Jewish Studio Project or LabShul without the spiritual, intellectual revolution in Israel in the 1990s. Peace seemed possible, Bibi was a bug and not a feature, the economy was growing, large numbers of Israelis began challenging a deadened liberal Jewish life while I was still snoozing.

Now, after a so-called Golden Age led by the Boomers that was high on personal liberation and achievement but low on content, we face yet another make-or-break moment in which we must reanimate the Jewish ecosystem with nuance and experimentation even as we fight for our survival. We can say with respect after nearly a quarter of a century has passed that Chabad ran the

table on Jewish engagement, Modern Orthodoxy grew, and the Haredim, in terms of growth and power, have had the most robust Golden Age of all, while liberal Judaism is again asleep at the wheel. We who follow in the footsteps of Ahad Ha'am and Jewish humanist Zionism have to wake up and get to work.

And in what context will that work take place? Jewish people are in danger everywhere. Political failures and fractures prevail. Messianic nationalism wants to claim the entirety of the Jewish narrative for itself. Foer is right. Something dramatic is happening in our world and it marks an end of something.

But at the same time, it marks both a continuation and a beginning. I refuse to believe that we are destined to slip down the ladder and into the abyss rung by rung. I know too many brilliant thinkers, practitioners, and dreamers of Judaism making Jewish culture, ritual, and consciousness ever richer. Yes, to be a Jewish writer today may not mean that a Jew can publish the great American novel steeped in artistry and assimilation and sell a million copies, but the gold of this age is that we actually are carrying something of the tradition that our great grandparents nearly lost in the pogroms of their days that led them to America and bore the Roths and the Dylans and the Streisands in the first place. Sadly, at least as a Jewish musician and writer, I know that I missed my chance at Boomer Bingo and hitting the jackpot of

cultural success without overcommitting to a Jewish identity. But I also really know what it means to be a Jew. I actually have a Jewish identity, my kids even more so.

As always, I'm with Dylan. My heart goes out to the young – the soldiers in the Gazan mud, the hostages in hell, the students facing mortal threats from misanthropic pawns who want to hurt them, the innocent victims of this war, especially the children, be they in Israel or Gaza, whose suffering makes it difficult to breathe.

These are dark days, but I still see a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow in our age where more and more people combine humanism with Talmud and Torah, traditional niggunim with trance, spiritual wizardry and rock and roll, and Shabbat is reimagined in tangible, teachable ways. The best laboratory to perform the alchemy of turning the lead of what bored us as kids into glittering spiritual gold is Israel and places like the one where I work, followed closely by scores of centers of Jewish comfort and innovation all around the world.

Make no mistake, we are in the fight of our lives to uphold human and Jewish values despite the hatred of our age. But the ladder to Love and Truth is always near. As we have for thousands of years, we have to grab it, look up to where we want to go, and then look down to make sure we lend a helping hand to the lost, the suffering, or the unaware who need to rise up with us.

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