

BY JILLIAN LEDERMAN

Memo from a Brown student: Do not run from Jewish values

July 16, 2024



Students, faculty and staff at Brown University held a gathering of Jewish solidarity shortly after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

Four weeks ago, I graduated from Brown University. My emotions were largely expected: excitement, nostalgia, pride ... but most overwhelming among these was a profound sense of relief.

I was desperate to escape the walls of Brown, where, for the past seven months, campus life was a story of perpetual unease, isolation, and betrayal.

I was quite involved in Brown's Zionist community, serving as the president of our pro-Israel club during my junior and senior years. I also served as the Executive Chair of Hillel International's Israel Leadership Network, a national coalition of Zionist student leaders, one each from over 150 college campuses across the United States and Canada. When Oct. 7 occurred, I was effectively poised as the leader of my campus' Zionist population.

We've all heard about life on college campuses post-Oct. 7. We've all seen images of masked students screaming slogans, barricading buildings, setting up encampments, and harassing Jews and Zionists.

Given that every television station in the nation has covered these incidents exhaustively, I want instead to

tell very specific and personal story.

It is the story of how, in the wake of the brutal massacre, rape, and incineration of our people, Jewish students were left to stand on our own.

We were abandoned. We were abandoned not only by those who hated us, but by those who were too ignorant to care, too apathetic to learn, and too brainwashed to resist. Worst of all, we were abandoned by several of our campus's Jewish adults: not because they were ignorant, apathetic, or brainwashed, but because they were scared.

The most dangerous force confronting the American Jewish population is not others' prejudice, but rather our own cowardice. The moment that we become too fearful to stand up for our values is the moment our community disintegrates. Nowhere is this risk more palpable than on college campuses.

Let's start at the beginning. Hamas militants stormed across Israel's border in the early morning of Oct. 7. They ransacked civilian houses and kibbutzim, raped women, slaughtered babies, and dragged hostages into the depths of Gaza.

The Jewish community spent the day in sickened, terrified shock. I will never forget hearing my friends'

siblings speak to them from bomb shelters, nor each pang of agonizing relief as my Israeli friends confirmed that they were alright. Another of my Israeli friends, who works in the U.S. as an Israel Fellow, lost several people in the attack. Oct. 7 is his birthday.

Every one of us has stories like these. What happened on Oct. 7 was not merely a vicious assault on every principle of humanity. It was the attempted extermination of our family.

In my mind, Jews at Brown had no choice not to stand in public defiance of this attack. Many of us suspected that Brown's chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, or SJP, was already preparing their own response to Oct. 7. And indeed, they were. It later came out that on Oct. 8, SJP organized an emergency meeting. And in that meeting, they declared that Oct. 7 "was, in fact, a victory."

In a just world, Brown's campus community would have immediately denounced SJP and come to the aid of their Jewish peers, who were even then still navigating the fog of terror and confusion.

Instead, 50 registered student organizations at Brown University rushed to declare their public alliance with SJP. In their words: "We stand in solidarity with

Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation.”

These are the ignorant, the apathetic, and the brainwashed. These are the same people whom so many Jews once marched with, protested alongside, and fought for. And yet, when it came time for them to do the same for us, they cavalierly, almost eagerly, flung us aside.

It did not stop there. On Halloween, two students screamed “free Palestine” at my friend who was wearing a *kippah*. That same night, two male students confronted me at a party, refusing to leave me alone as they accused me of supporting genocide. Someone took a picture of one Zionist student’s dorm window, which flew an Israeli flag, and posted it online, calling him “disgusting.” He was forced to call campus police. Two of my friends who also flew an Israeli flag outside their apartment received a death threat in their mailbox.

Every single person in these stories was targeted not solely because they are Jewish, but because they were identified as Zionists. Of course, this does not mean that these incidents were not antisemitic. They clearly were. The point that I am making is that at Brown, most Jews had a choice: if we wanted an easy life on campus, we could remain silent. We could keep our mouths shut as SJP members chanted for intifada and posted astonishingly hateful messages online. We

could, if we wanted to, assimilate.

I can understand why some Jewish students made that choice. What I cannot, and will never be able to understand, is the fact that many Jewish adults on Brown's campus chose the same.

Several days after the attack, my campus Hillel sent out an email. The email spoke of "the events in Israel" and prayed for "unity, courage, and peace." It did not mention Hamas. It did not issue a single condemnation. Every word was engineered to be as vague and values-neutral as possible.

In the weeks that followed, I had meeting after meeting with Hillel staff members. In each meeting, they told me: "No, we can't do more than one vigil for the victims of Oct. 7." "No, we can't put a hostage table out on the main green. It will be too divisive." "No, we can't put the Israeli flag in a visible location in the lobby. It will alienate too many people."

At every turn, the supposed adults in the room looked students in the eye and said "We are not brave enough. You are on your own."

During those first few months, I and the other student leaders of Brown's Jewish community did not sleep. We did not go to class. We spent every waking moment

planning our own vigils, organizing our own statements, comforting our own peers, and shouldering our own values as hundreds of our fellow students sneered and spat in our faces.

The most gut-wrenching aspect of all of this is that in the end, Hillel's restraint did not protect them. In February, the director and assistant director of my Hillel received violent threats directed at them and their families. Much as they tried to appease everyone, it turns out that a Jew is a Jew is a Jew.

This is our world. For Jews at Brown University, the consequences of our defiance are exclusion, threats, and prejudice. But for Jewish people our age in Israel, the consequences of defiance are bullets and bombs. They do not have the luxury to flee danger by keeping their mouths shut. And, ultimately, neither do we.

Whatever the reason why Jews have been abandoned by our non-Jewish peers, the burning reality of the past eight months is that Jews are on our own. There will always be those who would prefer us weak and stateless, always those who will villainize our home and demand our deference to their fraudulent definitions of justice.

Unluckily for them, the Jewish spirit abhors intimidation. Much to our enemies' annoyance, we have the inconvenient habit of overcoming existential

threats. After all, Am Yisrael Chai is not an aspiration – it is an enduring and audacious reality.

To preserve and continue this reality, we must embrace it with pride. As our friends and family in Israel storm into battle, we must do the very same at home, fearlessly strapping our values onto our backs as we march into the fray.

I implore all of you: do not avoid the hard subjects. We can condemn antisemitism until we are blue in the face. But until we tackle the difficult questions of how antisemitism interacts with anti-Zionism; why Israel is unfairly villainized; why Jews are continually left behind; and why so many members of our own community are too cowardly to stand up to these pernicious trends, our vulnerability will only persist.

Indeed, broaching the hard subjects sometimes means calling out one another's failures. My community at Brown was left behind by many of the Jewish leaders we should have been able to rely upon above all. But some of these leaders have since learned and grown from their mistakes, as have I – as have, I'm sure, many of you. That is what the Jewish people do. We grow. We mend bridges. We stick together. We leave no one behind.

From generation to generation, the Jewish people cultivate a legacy of tenacity, endurance, and pride. We

must hold each other accountable to this legacy, one that runs from Los Angeles to Boston, and from Haifa to Eilat. We are each other's people. And the people of Israel live, now and forever. Θ

Jillian Lederman is a recent graduate of Brown University and an incoming editorial fellow at The Wall Street Journal.