

Bernard-Henri Lévy Counters the Demonization of Israel

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Peter Berkowitz

COMMENTARY

A mark of the demonization of Israel is the contrivance of one body of international laws of war for the Jewish state alongside a separate and well-established body of laws governing armed conflict for the rest of the world. With Iran-backed Hamas' barbaric assault on Israeli civilians on Oct. 7, 2023, and the defensive war Israel launched to destroy Hamas and rescue the hostages, that malicious double standard has reached a new peak.

Last January, in "[A Special Dictionary for Israel](#)," Shany Mor, a lecturer in political thought at Reichman University in Israel, specified "two rhetorical functions" served by weaponizing international law against Israel. It enables critics to abjure partisan bias, claiming that universal principles compel them to condemn the Jewish state. And by casting Israel as an egregious violator of international law, international courts, diplomats, journalists, and law professors join with pro-Hamas student activists to encourage odious comparisons between Israel and the Nazis who targeted Jews for extermination.

To delegitimize the Jewish state, Israel's accusers have corruptly reconfigured key international laws of war concepts.

For the rest of the world, "proportionality" requires that force be proportional to the accomplishment of a legitimate military goal, which allows for foreseeable but unintended collateral damage. In Israel's case, proportionality entails that the Jewish state's military operations must not cause more harm than Israel has incurred.

For the rest of the world, "collective punishment" involves imposition of costs on groups not involved in the fight. In Israel's case, collective punishment encompasses the unintended and indirect effects on noncombatants of military operations.

For the rest of the world, "occupation" refers to a nation's controlling presence in another state's territory. In Israel's case, it was said before Oct. 7 that it occupied Gaza even though Israel withdrew all its soldiers and civilians in 2005, Egypt controls its side of the border with Gaza, Israel controls its side, and Israel maintains a lawful naval blockade of Gaza to thwart the jihadists' unlawful rocket attacks on Israeli civilians.

And for the rest of the world, "genocide" names the deliberate destruction of a people, in part or in whole. In Israel's case, genocide describes Palestinian hardships or casualty counts deriving from Hamas' war against the Jewish state that Israel's vilifiers deem disproportional.

Bernard-Henri Lévy shows that the demonization of Israel goes well beyond the nefarious fabrication of a separate body of international law to defame and convict the Jewish state. Known internationally as BHL, he dedicates his slim new volume “Israel Alone” – as he dedicated the original French book released in March – to the 131 hostages then held by Hamas. Today, fewer than 100 abductees, living and dead, remain in Gaza.

Lévy’s book is many things. It is a *cri de coeur* from one who for decades has defended Israel against the vicious attacks to which it has been regularly subject. It is a philosophical reflection on history, memory, fidelity, and justice. And it is a summons to appreciate Israel’s spectacular achievements, grasp its peril, and recognize that the nation’s fight to exercise sovereignty as a rights-protecting democracy in the Jewish people’s ancestral homeland has become inseparable from the defense of free and democratic nation-states against the mounting authoritarian threat.

A prominent French public intellectual – political commentator, novelist, filmmaker, playwright – Lévy, now in his mid-70s, is the author of over 40 books, has made eight films, and publishes frequently as a columnist. Trained in philosophy, he emerged in the 1970s as a leader of the “new philosophers,” a young generation of French anti-Marxist intellectuals who rediscovered the virtues of the modern tradition of freedom. His writings, which glide from philosophy to history, politics, literature, and religion, have a propensity for the florid and the grandiose. Wealthy, dashing, flamboyant, and globe-trotting, he has journeyed to war zones for 50 years to chronicle outrages against human rights. On Oct. 8, 2023, he landed in the war zone into which Hamas had transformed Israel – to commiserate with friends, report on the atrocities, and explore the massacre’s significance for Israel and the free world.

According to Lévy, “the pogrom of October 7, 2023” was not a mere event but rather, in German philosopher Reiner Schürmann’s sense of the term, an “Event” – possessing “historical, epochal, era-opening power.” Like Al Qaeda’s Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the Oct. 7 slaughter was “unprecedented in form.” Notwithstanding the military intelligence that should have anticipated an attack of some sort, Oct. 7 was “unpredictable” and appears “unthinkable, incalculable.” Such an Event “breaks history in two.” The jihadists’ savagery makes it impossible, maintains Lévy, to return to the comforting belief that history is progressive and reasonable.

The Event precipitated three “upheavals.” The first involved “the alignment, for the worse, of Israel with the diaspora.” The jihadists’ GoPro body cameras and social networks broadcast around the globe delivered the bone-chilling message, “There is nowhere in the world where Jews are safe.” The second upheaval – sparked not only by the jihadists’ killing, raping, mutilating, and kidnapping of Jews but also by the delight the terrorists took in the murder and mayhem – was the eruption into the civilized world of “radical evil,” that is, “the evil of man devouring man.” The third upheaval consisted in the rallying of anti-Western forces – “Russia, China, the Iran of the ayatollahs, neo-Ottoman Turkey, and the Arab countries prone to jihadism” – to Hamas’ cause.

Widespread efforts throughout the West to erase the Oct. 7 slaughter, argues Lévy, constituted a second Event. New York Congressman Jamaal Bowman and various “pro-Palestinian” activists – as well as an adviser to British foreign secretary David Cameron – voiced doubts that Israeli women had been raped, notwithstanding the ghastly evidence of Hamas’ sexual brutalization of female soldiers and civilians. Politicians, professors, and students on both sides of the Atlantic justified the killing and kidnapping of Israelis – soldiers and civilians – as the legitimate exercise of Hamas’ right to resist. The Red Cross ignored or downplayed the Hamas-held captives. And UN Secretary General António Guterres blamed Oct. 7 on Israel’s supposed occupation of Gaza. These are the tip of the iceberg.

More broadly, and already in the early months of the war, Israel’s demonizers enlisted three stock arguments. They employed “the indestructible, inextinguishable, eternal ‘Yes, but’ so dear to professional excusers of evil.” They insisted on Israel’s obligation to accept a ceasefire, even as it defended itself against Hamas’ nightmarish aggression and battled Hezbollah in Lebanon and other Iranian regional proxies that also aimed to wipe it out. And, amid the trauma and complex war effort, they demanded that Israel collaborate in the prompt establishment of a Palestinian state, which disregarded Israel’s security and could only be seen by Jerusalem’s enemies as confirming that sufficient brutality induces capitulation to their demands.

The Oct. 7 slaughter let loose “a gale of anti-Semitism,” not least in France and, most shockingly to Lévy, in the United States. The worst moment, he maintains, came when the Harvard, MIT, and University of Pennsylvania presidents declined at a congressional hearing to characterize calling for the genocide of the Jews on their campuses as harassment.

“When you realize that these three universities appear at the bottom of the free speech rankings compiled each year by the nonpartisan Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, it is hard to avoid the following conclusion: All minorities on campus are protected against offensive comments; safe spaces and comfort zones are provided so students aren’t inconvenienced by free but hurtful statements,” writes Lévy. “That is, all minorities but one.”

Lévy responds directly to several stock accusatory questions intended to establish Israel’s guilt for the atrocities Hamas perpetrated against Israelis and for the tragic loss of Palestinian lives in Gaza.

First, rather than assimilate among the nations, Jews opted to exercise national sovereignty, he explains in the spirit of the early political Zionists, because antisemitism made a state necessary.

Second, Israel is not a “colonial” state – the smug conceit on college campuses these days – because Jewish presence in the land extends back more than 3,000 years, almost two millennia before the birth of Islam and the arrival of Arabs. Moreover, whereas in the 20th and

21st centuries the Jews consistently embraced compromise over the land, the Arabs consistently rejected it.

Third, the Arab-Muslim world bears partial responsibility for the flight of Jews to Israel because of Arab-Muslim support of Nazism in World War II.

And fourth, while “civilian deaths in Gaza, including the death of children” are unintended and terrible consequences of Israel’s exercise of its right to self-defense, “the responsibility for these children’s deaths lies first and foremost not with Israel but with those who turned them into human shields.”

A secular Jew and no stranger to Israel’s shortcomings, Lévy sees in the nation’s brave soldiers, in citizens’ unflagging determination to bring home the hostages, and in the gloriously diverse population – Jewish and non-Jewish – stirring evidence of Israel’s having kept faith with its founding principles. Countering, as he does, the rampant demonization of Israel – the free and democratic nation-state of the Jewish people – is not only admirable and just. It is also crucial to the defense of freedom and democracy in a world increasingly hostile to America’s founding principles.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.