Jewish Strength: Defying the Anti-Semites

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It’s hard to recall a time in recent decades when we’ve seen more bad news for Jews. The massacre of Oct. 7; the alarming rise in antisemitism, especially on college campuses; the framing of Jews and Israel as white oppressors and colonialists; a protest movement that defends terrorists; biased media and education, etc.– everywhere we turn, we seem to find another threat.

In all this bad news, one piece of good news can easily get lost: we’ve never had more power to fight back.

Indeed, one can argue that the most significant Jewish development of the past 100 years is the transformation of Jews from a physically vulnerable people that went to its slaughter to a powerful people able to defend itself.

Given the rise in Jew hatred, it may sound odd to mention Jewish strength. But both thoughts can be true at once: We have a greater need to defend ourselves as well as a greater power to do so.

Israel’s 75-year history is the epitome of that idea. Surrounded by antisemitic animosity and constant threats to its survival, the Jewish state was forced to become stronger and stronger. With a greater need to defend itself came a greater power to do so. The massacre of Oct. 7 only reinforced that idea.

Now compare modern Israel to the Jews of Europe who trembled with fear 85 years ago as Jew haters prepared to take them to their deaths, all six million of them. Those Jews also had an enormous need to defend themselves– but zero power to do so.

If there’s such a thing as an afterlife, I can imagine six million Jewish souls in heaven right now smiling at the feistiness of their descendants.

Feisty we are.

Whether in Israel or in the Diaspora, the Jews of 2024 are anything but the Jews of Auschwitz. We are no longer weak. We are no longer invisible. We are no longer silent.

Everywhere there are threats, we see assertive Jews defending their people, whether through institutional gatherings, civic activism, social media, legal initiatives, street rallies, philanthropic involvement, academic activism, Super Bowl commercials, even flashy murals of Israeli hostages to greet attendees at the Academy Awards.

The Jews of 2024 make noise. We should never underestimate or underappreciate the power and the freedom to make that noise.

Pick any attack on Jews and you're bound to hear Jewish noise. The United Nations may be shamelessly biased against Israel, but that didn't stop Foreign Minister Israel Katz from addressing the UN Security Council yesterday, asking its 15 members to declare Hamas a terrorist organization and to pressure the group to release all hostages.

It was nasty of Oscar-winning filmmaker Jonathan Glazer to use his acceptance speech to hijack the Holocaust and bash Israel, but the backlash has been as loud as an Iron Dome rocket. Among the reactions was a letter from the Holocaust Survivors Foundation telling Glazer it was "disgraceful for you to presume to speak for the six million Jews, including one and a half million children, who were murdered solely because of their Jewish identity. You should be ashamed of yourself for using Auschwitz to criticize Israel."

This week, Hebrew University suspended a law faculty lecturer, Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, due to her involvement in a petition that accuses Israel of committing genocide in Gaza.

Throughout our post-biblical history, Jewish strength came from our tradition, our wisdom and our values. Today, our strength also comes from our ability to defend ourselves.

Jew haters may have the right to spew their hate, but Jews have the right to take them on, and we are using it.

The Anti-Defamation League has been chronicling that hate for years, while also taking action. Last week it held its annual Never is Now conference that attracted 4,000 attendees and featured speakers like Israeli President Isaac Herzog; State Department antisemitism envoy Deborah Lipstadt; Rabbi David Wolpe; author Dara Horn; philanthropist-activist Marc Rowan; and Daniel Lifshitz, an advocate for the hostages whose grandfather, Oded, is still in captivity.

“Antisemitism is not just a threat to Jews but to democracy,” said Lipstadt.

“We are not OK,” ADL head Jonathan Greenblatt said in his “State of Hate” address. “The world of Oct. 8 is one in which the perpetrators of the worst antisemitic massacre since the Holocaust are celebrated as heroes – not just in Ramallah or Beirut, but in London and New York and on campuses, including Harvard and Columbia.”

We are not OK, but we are blessed that we can do something about it.

Even if Israel may face opposition in some parts of our government, let’s never forget that the most powerful parliament in the world, the U.S. Congress, is strongly supportive of Israel, and that American political leaders across the board have joined the fight against antisemitism.

So yes, the bad news is that there’s a greater need to defend ourselves, but the good news is that all around us are signs of our ability to do just that. We need not apologize for our influence and

our activism to protect Jewish rights. That activism also includes the freedom to dissent. Jews are not a monolithic voice, which is part of our strength.

Our strength also comes from our multiple and diverse contributions to America, which date to the very beginning of our American journey. As Lipstadt said, our fight is America's fight. As grateful beneficiaries of the American Dream, we are ideally suited to bring it back to life.

I saw this anonymous note in Reddit recently that moved me:

"We are not weak, we are Jews. We are the ones who wrestled with angels. We are the ones who dragged Nazis out of South America to stand trial in the homeland. We are the ones who rescued more than 100 hostages in Entebbe in the pitch black of night. We are the ones who rose from near obliteration to absolute shining examples of productive citizens. We will continue to show the world how we alchemize fear and trembling into courage and success."

Throughout our post-biblical history, Jewish strength came from our tradition, our wisdom and our values. Today, our strength also comes from our ability to defend ourselves, as fundamental a value as there ever was one. We may be under attack from haters, but unlike our ancestors, now we can fight back.