Editorials by David Suissa

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(From The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, September 21, 2024)

When we discuss Israel’s image, we rarely mention the obvious: Since the founding of
the state, Israel’s image has been dominated by white Ashkenazim: From Ben Gurion to
Weitzmann to Dayan to Golda to Peres to Begin to Rabin to Herzog to Sharon to Olmert to Livni
to Bennett to Lapid to Gantz to Gallant to Smotrich to Levin and, of course, to Netanyahu and
countless others, the white Ashkenazic Jew has been front and center in the global media
coverage of Israel.

This is absolutely not a criticism; it’s more of an observation.
But it’s also a missed opportunity for those who worry about improving Israel’s

image.
There’s a tendency among those in the “hasbara” world to take the idea of image figuratively. That is, when they talk about Israel’s image, they don’t mean a real image; they
mean a general perception of Israel that needs to be improved.

This is how we end up obsessed with talking points and arguments. We need facts! We
need education! We need to correct the lies!

Yes, but somehow, no one ever says we need new pictures.

We assume, in other words, that the best way to fix Israel’s image is through words and
arguments rather than through actual images.

The irony is that as we exert ourselves to correct the lies against Israel, one epic lie
remains untouched: The lie that Israel is a white country. But where do we think this lie comes
from? It comes mostly from Israel itself, from the simple fact that virtually every person who
represents Israel in the media is a white Ashkenazi. The good news is that this can be fixed by
being more accurate and recognizing the multicultural diversity that makes Israeli society so
vibrant.

“Only about 30% of Israeli Jews are Ashkenazic, or the descendants of European Jews,”
Hen Mazzig wrote a few years ago in The Los Angeles Times. “I am baffled as to why
mainstream media and politicians around the world ignore or misrepresent these facts and the
Mizrahi story. Perhaps it’s because our history shatters a stereotype about the identity of my

country and my people.”

Very true, but let’s recognize that this stereotype is also what Israel presents to the world.
It would be a lot harder for the mainstream media to ignore Israel’s multicultural nature if
Mizrahim and other Israelis of color would be fully integrated in its media relations.
I was reminded of this at a talk last Friday by Dr. Duygu Atlas, a Muslim-Israeli historian
who lives in Tel Aviv. She was discussing a new initiative, Muslims Connect with Israel (MCI),
that she hopes will change the way Israelis are perceived and understood by Muslim societies.

She kept coming back to this key point: The best way to talk about Israel and break down
stereotypes is to show its cultural and ethnic diversity.
In an ideal colorblind world, maybe none of this would matter. But that’s not the world
we live in. Color matters. Culture matters. Diversity matters. If Israel is so ethnically diverse,
why not show it?

(Indeed, the same applies to American Jewry and its leadership: If Jews in America today
are so ethnically diverse, why not show it? Why not integrate Mizrahim and Jews of color in the
communal leadership? We like to go on about the importance of diversity and inclusion, but
what are we doing at the leadership level to show a more diverse and accurate Jewish face in the
mainstream media?)

Here’s a suggestion for pro-Israel activists on social media: Fewer words, more pictures.
In addition to your regular talking points, blast your networks with hundreds of images of Israelis

from all corners of the globe who are anything but the white Jewish stereotype people see in the
media.

Same goes for philanthropists who buy billboards and advertising to “make the case for
Israel”; a picture is worth a thousand clever phrases. Use striking images that celebrate the ethnic
kaleidoscope of the Jewish state. Title it “Israel in Living Color.” Nothing breaks the ice like true
ethnic diversity.

For the Israeli government, if they want their communication to have more impact,
there’s no better place to start than to have “spokespeople in living color.”
“In living color” is the true face of Israel and the Jewish people. White is not. “In living
color” adds complexity and nuance to the conversation about Israel and the many challenges
facing the Jewish world.

“I am Mizrahi,” Mazzig wrote, “as are the majority of Jews in Israel today. We are of
Middle Eastern and North African descent.”
After 76 years of conveying one image based mostly on one ethnicity, it’s high time
Israel and world Jewry show their true colors to the world.

Israel Defends the Cult of Life

(From The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, October 1, 2024)
If you want a deeper understanding of Israel’s situation in the Middle East, a good place
to start is the website of the Jaffa Hotel in Tel Aviv, which came up recently under a list of the
world’s finest hotels. The Jaffa was the only entry from Israel.

What caught my eye was that in the charming area of Jaffa where the hotel is located, two terrorists murdered seven civilians and wounded 17 others in the deadliest terror attack since Oct. 7. The assault occurred on Tuesday evening, just as Iran was launching hundreds of ballistic missiles at Israel.

Here in America, it’s easy to get morally confused in the fogs of war. When bombs are flying everywhere and people are dying everywhere, whether in Gaza or Lebanon or Tel Aviv, things tend to blur. People with big hearts like to call on all sides to just stop the killing.
This moral blurring, however, is not just wrong but dangerous, especially for the side that didn’t start the killing.

The missiles from Iran and its terror proxies are not the same as the Iron Dome missiles from Israel. The soldiers from Israel’s army are not the same as the terrorist soldiers from Hamas or Hezbollah. Aiming to murder civilians is not the same as aiming to kill terrorists.
When Israel is at war, a Cult of Life is forced to defend itself against a Cult of Death.
It’s astonishing that this even needs to be said, given that it’s been true for so long and that Israel’s enemies have never pretended to be anything but an anti-Israel death cult.
For decades now, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas have made clear that their primary mission is not to build fancy hotels, charming tourist districts, schools, and hospitals that will improve the lives of their people.

It’s to get rid of Israel.

Israel left Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005 and has never occupied an inch of Iranian territory. The attacks on the Jewish state are based not on Israeli provocations but on a pure hatred that aims to destroy.

This ugly moral truth can easily get lost when Israel is involved, as demonstrated most sharply by the blatant double-standards applied to the Jewish state at the United Nations.
The ugliness of pure hatred also gets lost with sophisticated and academic thinking.
Perhaps the truth is too raw, too clear, too moral. Elite thinkers, by definition, must bring nuance and complexity to their analyses. They must weigh tactics and strategies and envision the geopolitical future. This has intellectual merit, but it tends to hide moral ugliness.
Israelis, on the other hand, know the ugliness well. What they worry about most is not geopolitics but the location of the nearest bomb shelter. Indeed, these bomb shelters are a poignant reminder of how much Israelis value life.

When they're not running to bomb shelters, Israelis are busy building one of the most vibrant, creative, and innovative societies on earth. This also can get lost in the noise of the loud civic protests against the government, the political infighting, and the constant need to defend against terrorism. But the vibrancy and the resilience are there. Ask any visitor.
The genius of Israel is that despite being under siege since its birth, it has never satisfied itself only with physical security. It always aimed to thrive rather than just survive.

I felt that vibrancy and resiliency and love of life when I checked out the website

of the
Jaffa hotel, a magnificent tribute to ancient elegance:
[The hotel] stands as a prestigious 5-star establishment situated within a meticulously
restored 19th-century complex, once the home of Jaffa's French Hospital.
Ideally positioned near the Mediterranean Sea and the historic port of Jaffa, it grants
effortless access to attractions such as the Shuk Hapishpeshim flea market, the city of old
Jaffa's art galleries, and charming local boutiques, all just a short stroll away.

Our signature chef restaurant, Giardino, showcases culinary creations inspired by the
flavors of the Northern Mediterranean, following a unique 'port-to-table' philosophy.
Alternatively, relish elevated Israeli cuisine at Golda's at The Jaffa. Experience serenity
at the L.RAPHAEL Spa and indulge in the personalized luxury of our 120 opulent rooms
and suites, thoughtfully appointed by the renowned designer, John Pawson. Allow our
dedicated concierge team to meticulously orchestrate every aspect of your stay, renew
your spirit, and ignite your imagination.

If anything can renew our spirits in the midst of a war in Lebanon and ballistic missiles
from Iran and enemies sworn to Israel's destruction, it is this little corner of Israel that refuses to
lose its imagination.

Can Jews Handle Being Different

(From The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, October 9, 2024)

There are so many lessons Jews have taken on the first anniversary of October 7. These
lessons reflect the shock, the grieving and the trauma that still linger in Jewish

hearts from the
biggest disaster in Israeli history.

But in this whirlwind of emotions, let’s not forget another ancient lesson that Oct. 7 has
brought home: Jews are treated differently.

Consider just the fact that after 1,200 Israelis were massacred on that Black Sabbath, a
global movement began to attack…the Jews! That’s right. Before Israel launched any military
activity in Gaza, the Jew-haters were mobilizing to blame the Jews for the massacre of Jews.
Blaming the Jews, of course, is old hat, but seeing it in the wake of the Oct. 7 atrocities
stunned even the cynics. It’s as if Jews were not allowed to be victims, so Jew-haters doubled
down on the oppressor narrative.

Meanwhile, one never heard a peep on college campuses about the Chinese government’s
ongoing genocide of the Uyghurs; or Russia’s kidnapping of an estimated 20,000 to 25,000
Ukrainian children; or the nightmarish oppression of women by the Taliban; or the daily
executions in Iran; or the slavery and child marriages being reintroduced by the Houthis; or the
horrific massacres of Black African ethnic groups in Sudan, echoing the Darfur genocide two
decades ago, and on and on.

And lest you think that pro-Hamas protesters care about Palestinians, you’ll never hear
them complain about the squalid state of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. Why?
Because Jews are not involved.

These campus haters take their lead from global forces of hypocrisy, most notably at the
United Nations, where the Jewish state receives more condemnations than all other nations
combined. Why? Because it’s the Jewish state.

Jews get special treatment. It’s as old as the Bible.

Maybe the world could never forgive us for being the first ones to talk to God, or for
stubbornly holding on to our tradition for millennia, or for always figuring out ways to prevail
and succeed despite centuries of persecution.

Is it possible that the world treats Jews differently because we are, in fact, different? Sure,
Jews may be incredibly diverse and argumentative, but as far as the world is concerned, they see
us as one united bunch.

Jew-haters, for example, don’t care whether we’re Reform or Orthodox, Republican or
Democrat, progressive or conservative, Ashkenazic or Sephardic. They hate us all just the same.
They believe in Jewish unity.

This unity also applies to those who love and admire us—we are a successful and remarkable tribe that punches way above its weight.

“If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human
race,” Mark Twain wrote in 1897. He continues,

It suggests a nebulous puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the

Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?
We don't need to be arrogant or triumphalist to embrace our difference. We can be engaged with the world and embrace our own diversity while still owning our Jewish identity.
Just as other ethnic groups show pride in their differences, why can't Jews do the same?
Ultimately, we are all individuals with independent minds, but as Jews, we also have a shared history and a shared destiny that bring us together.

Maybe now, in the wake of a lingering Oct. 7 trauma we will never forget, it’s time to
embrace the bonds that have kept us going for millennia.

Fighting Antisemitism by Winning

(From The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, October 15, 2024)

When I meet a Jewish college student who has encountered some of the anti-Jewish and
anti-Israel venom spreading through many campuses, I have a favorite line of questioning:
Did you miss any final exams because of the protests?

Did you miss any assignments?
How did you do this semester?

In most cases, the answer is that the ugly protests, however annoying and frightening,
have not hurt their academic performance. This is encouraging. It doesn’t mean, of course, that
Jews should stop fighting the forces of hate and focus only on their education.

What it does mean is that sometimes the best way to fight haters is to focus on improving
ourselves. Throughout our checkered history of facing hate and persecution, Jews have prevailed
by playing the long game, never abandoning the essential values of learning and personal
growth.

It wasn’t easy to focus on ourselves during the Ten Days of Repentance. We entered
Yom Kippur consumed with the multiple dangers of a post-Oct. 7 world; naturally, many of the

sermons we heard dealt with those dangers and how to confront them.

But those exterior threats, as urgent and consequential as they are, have little to do with
the intimacy of our lives.

I can fight for Israel all day long but forget to call my mother to bring her a little joy.
I can join an activist group but fail to visit a sick uncle in the hospital.

I can follow current events but fail to attend an important event for a friend.

No matter how loud and urgent the outside noise, we can't allow it to stifle our inner
selves. The hostility toward Jews is bad enough; when we allow it to interfere with our personal
growth is when we lose.

I have a dark theory about Jew-haters. It's not just the Jews they hate—it's also what
Jews represent. They hate the aura of success that surrounds Jews.

For all I know much of their anger may be rooted in their wanting what Jews have.
Just as the extraordinary success of Israel has attracted resentment among its hostile
neighbors, the perennial success of American Jews has attracted envy among those disinclined to
admire people who work their way up.

A movement that has turned "success" into "white privilege" has only made things worse
for Jews, most of whom are conditioned from childhood to strive to constantly improve.
The answer is not to seek sympathy by playing for victim points. We've learned the hard
way that Jew-hatred is flexible enough to adapt to any condition—whether Jews

are weak or
strong, rich or poor, left or right, and so on.

The point is this: Since the haters will hate Jews no matter what, we might as well win in
the game of life.

Let the protesters win the yelling game. Let them damage their vocal cords to show
support for Hamas. Let them invest thousands of hours playing wannabe Che Guevaras. The
returns on that investment are bound to be illusionary, like gorging on cotton candy.
Jew haters must know deep down how safe and predictable it is to side with the Palestinians, the world's most coddled victims. The true rebels today, those who go against the
grain, are the Zionists. That is the courageous choice.

It's also the winning one. Losers define winning by how much noise they make. Winners
define winning by how much they accomplish. By that metric, Jews have been humanity's
winners since time immemorial.

No other group in America has contributed more to the country than the Jews, in fields
ranging from science, literature and social justice to culture, comedy and journalism.
The winds of hate that have accelerated since Oct. 7 have cast a shadow on this image of
the winning Jew. Faced with the need to defend ourselves, we've tended to look weak and
defensive. And given that victims are America's new power brokers, we've also been made to
feel guilty about our success.

This is neither good for the Jews nor for America. An America that elevates victimhood
over success is a nation headed for the abyss. Jews shouldn’t hide their success. Indeed, they
should resuscitate and revalorize the very notion of success, walking not just as proud Jews but
as proud successful Jews.

In the long run, success is our strongest weapon in the fight against antisemitism. Let the
haters scream on the streets and play victim. Jews have better things to do, like going to class and
learning how to win.