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Who speaks out for the Jewish refugees expelled from Arab lands?

JASEN SAGMAN

Every year on Nov. 29, the international community marks the anniversary of the UN Partition Resolution 181(II). It is often forgotten that this resolution, dating back to 1947, was the very first blueprint for an Israeli-Palestinian “two states for two peoples” solution. While this resolution was accepted by Jewish leaders, it was renounced by Arab and Palestinian leadership, who also, by their own accord, declared war on the fledgling Jewish state – while simultaneously targeting their own Jewish populations with tangential displacement, and dispossessing Palestinian people from the mandated state.

Had Resolution 181(II) been accepted by the Arab States contiguous to contemporary Israel, there would have been no 1948 Arab-Israeli War, nor the ensuing refugee problems. Instead, the annual UN-organized International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People may well have marked peace within the entire Middle East, as a direct result of the coexistent establishment of Israel and Palestine.

Instead, in May 1948, the local Arab population of Mandated Palestine was joined by seven Arab states in a collective UN-violated attempt to destroy the newly re-established Jewish state. This conflict would become known to Israelis as the “War of Independence,” and to Palestinians as “The Catastrophe.” This distinction in narratives is vitally important in understanding the plight of both Jewish and Palestinian refugees over the past 67 years.

As a direct outcome of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, 500,000 Palestinians fled to camps in neighbouring Arab States as refugees, while 160,000 accepted Israel’s offer to remain. Today, there are more than 1.6 million Israeli-Arabs living in Israel – 20 per cent of Israel’s population!

The subject of refugees remains one of the core issues for understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, the rights and claims of one group have come to be promoted at the expense and displacement of the other. This need not be the case, as the question of peace is never a zero-sum game. In fact, the opposite ought to hold true. As the Jewish and Palestinian refugees are reciprocally and intrinsically linked, light shed on one ought to shine onto both.

With the rejection of Resolution 181(II), a vast exchange of populations took place in the Middle East between 1947 and 1952 – with the number of displaced Jews from Arab States exceeding that of Arabs from Mandated Palestine. Despite this fact, the revisionist Middle East narrative holds that there was only one victim population: the Palestinians – and that Israel was responsible. Not only is this factually incorrect, but it rejects the pain and plight of almost one million Jews who were expelled from Arab states for no reason other than that they were Jewish.

Moreover, this revisionist narrative not only concealed the forgotten exodus from memory and remembrance, but it also denied that it was forced. Simply put, the Arab states rejected a proposed Palestinian state by declaring a UN-violated war on the fledgling Jewish state, and targeted their Jewish population living in their respective Arab states. This created two refugee groups: the evacuee Palestinian refugee population resulting from the UN-violated Arab war against Israel, and the Jewish refugees resulting from Arab hostilities against its own expelled Jewish population – which included forced expulsions, illegal confiscation of property, denationalization, arbitrary arrests, torture and murder.

The United Nations also bears express and continued responsibility for the distorted narrative of Jewish refugees. Since 1948, for instance, there have been more than 150 UN resolutions that have dealt unequivalently with the Palestinian refugee plight. Not one, however, has made any reference to, or expressed any concern for, the plight of almost one million displaced Jews from Arab States.

The Palestinians are also the only group of refugees out of the more than 100 million from World War II who were provided with their own special UN agency – UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) – which, according to its mandate, cannot help but perpetuate their tragedy. Every other refugee in the world is administered by UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Taking into account the imbalance of attention and resources given to Palestinian refugees over Jewish refugees, this essay recommends five steps to rectify a historical wrong and ongoing injustice. Taken individually, these steps would bring attention, retribution, closure and/or compensation to the victims. Together, however, these steps would bring a sustainable and balanced solution for Jewish and Palestinian refugees to live and thrive in coexistent peace.

First, each of the Arab States – and the Arab League – must acknowledge its role and responsibility in the triple aggression of launching a UN-violated war against the UN’s newly created State of Israel, the perpetration of human rights violations against their Jewish populations, and the tangential Palestinian displacement and disposition from Mandated Palestine.

Second, reparations must be invoked for Jews displaced from Arab States – including financial compensation.

Third, the UN must recognize the perpetuation that is caused by UNRWA and transfer responsibility for Palestinian refugees to UNHCR.

Fourth, the international community’s perception of Jewish refugees must change, including referencing and addressing their plight in balanced measure to that of Palestinian refugees.

And fifth, bilateral Israeli-Palestinian Peace negotiations must include reference to Jewish refugees as well as Palestinian refugees.

The exclusion of and denial of rights and redress to Jewish refugees from Arab states continues to distort comprehensive negotiations between the peace negotiation parties, and to distort a just and lasting settlement plan. As Irwin Cotler, a former minister of justice and attorney general of Canada, once noted, “Where there is no remembrance, there is no truth; where there is no truth, there will be no justice; where there is no justice, there will be no reconciliation; and where there is no reconciliation, there will be no peace – which we all seek.”

This call to guarantee the rights and reparations for Jewish refugees from Arab states will not counter Palestinian rights and claims. Rather, it will encourage all parties to recognize the fact that there were two groups of refugees, each of whom are entitled to redress and to an enduring peace and coexistence.

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What drove the change?

RONI ZVEIRIS

What drove the change in attitude toward Israeli immigrants to North America throughout the past few decades?

Background

The last decades of the 20th century created a dilemma for the State of Israel, involving the emigration of Israelis to North America. The following report will describe the transformation in outlook towards the “yordim” and the causes that drove the change.

The importance of this issue is twofold. First, classic Zionism, which proclaims Israel as the Jewish motherland, frowns upon the movement of Jews away from Israel. Second, from Israel’s perspective, leaders wish to benefit from expatriates while understanding that a decrease in the local Jewish population is detrimental.

While many Israelis are comfortable with emigrating for the pursuit of prosperity and stability, others debate whether leaving is ethically sensible. Understanding this complex relationship could help Israeli expatriates strengthen their ties with Israel while enjoying the benefits provided by North America.

Beginning of a new immigration movement

Throughout the 1970s, Israeli Jews began immigrating to North America. Unlike Soviet and Persian Jews, who saw North America as a political asylum, Israelis moved for economic or educational reasons. For Jewish leaders, the classic Zionist stance of “shelilat haGolah,” (“negation of the Diaspora”) explicitly sought to halt the Diaspora as a form of Jewish life. As stated by Itzhak Rabin, those who left Israel were “nemushot” (“weaklings”).

While the Israeli government believed that a decrease in population could pose an imminent threat to the nation’s security, North American Jews were worried that the Zionist vision was failing if Israelis were leaving the Holy Land.

Integration in North America

The integration process of Israeli Jews can be divided into five stages. First, during 1975-1980, the “explicit denial” policy manifested itself as many Jewish leaders denied that Israelis were immigrating to North America. While this rationale was suitable since many Israelis moved for short-term job contracts, the growth in permanent relocation made North American Jewry more aggressive.

As Israeli immigration grew in the 1980s, it became too large to ignore, forcing Jewish leaders to adopt a policy of “malign neglect.” While this did not cause any substantial change, local Jews continued claiming that “they [Israeli Jews] were bad Jews, and the Jewish community should have nothing to do with them.”

Towards 1985, Jewish leaders developed the “benign neglect” policy, providing Israeli Jews with the opportunity to participate in the Jewish community. However, the policy prohibited special services that would specifically cater to the Israeli community, such as Israeli-style synagogues.

The local community believed that “there is an implication that the citizens who left Israel [should] feel guilty [due to the] betrayal of the shared obligation to protect Israel.”

Subsequently, a fourth policy of “containment” aimed to proactively act against Israeli immigration. This involved the creation of Zionist programs that encouraged Israeli Jews and their children to return to Israel. However, these programs had limited success because many Israeli Jews moved to North America for financial motives rather than emotional Zionist considerations.

Thus, York University professor Rina Cohen argues that an “accommodation” policy began around 1990, where the former “communal deviants” started their absorption in community groups. The groups’ growth practically forced them to immerse locally because Israelis did not have widespread access to Israeli culture. With time, this led many Israelis to connect to local Jews through themes of philanthropy and Jewish education, both uncommon in Israel. Thus, the stage was ready for a full integration of Israelis into local Jewish life.

Change from Israel’s perspective

During the early 1980s, Israeli leaders realized that the purposes for which Israelis were leaving (education, employment, love) could not be easily replicated in Israel. The systematic belittling of Israeli expatriates and motives of Zionist guilt were not effective. Therefore, Israel created a new Diaspora policy in 1985, based on understanding that emigrants will want to come back only if they have some ties to Israel. Hence, Israel encouraged Diaspora Jews to study about Israel’s culture and religion, and provided funding toward travel to Israel. This allowed Israeli Jews in North America to create their own local sub-communities, often funded by the State of Israel.

From Zionism to Jewish ‘Peoplehood’

As traditional Zionism weakened, the concept of “Peoplehood” emerged. If in the past the Jewish goal was to build the State of Israel, “Peoplehood” argues that the modern focus is to build strong global Jewish communities. Israel no longer requires immediate physical attendance from all Jews because greater contributions can be made through philanthropy, science, technology, business, and education. Peoplehood creates a symbiotic relationship whereby global Jewish communities and Israel learn to accept Israeli Jewish immigrants.

“Peoplehood” relies on several pillars. First, it requires using mutual aid to build a global network of prosperous and resilient Jewish communities, wherever they may be. Second, it defines Hebrew as the global Jewish language, favouring the integration of Israeli Jews. Third, Peoplehood encourages the strengthening of Israel and North American Jews. Fourth, Peoplehood also relies on the common goal of fighting anti-Semitism. The impact of Peoplehood on Israeli Jews in North America is portrayed through the Jewish Agency for Israel. While the organization historically viewed “aliyah” as a core mission, a profound change is now seen through the Strategic Plan for Israel.

Rather than rejecting former Israelis due to misalignment with “aliyah” values, the plan involves social activism and creation of unique Jewish experiences that is provided through activities in Israel.

Conclusion

Overall, the change in outlook toward Israeli Jews was driven by three factors. First, the North American Jewish community changed its behaviour due to the sheer growth of the Israeli Jewish population. Second, the State of Israel understood that policies of rejection would only distance emigrants. Last, Peoplehood reinforced the change by replacing classic Zionism and creating a new mentality that eliminated mistreatment towards Israeli Jews in North America.

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The CJN Prize Event

Some of the close to 100 people at the CJN Prize night Feb. 10.
How I met my Rabbi

First, I came as a rebel. I’ll be honest: I was a 16-year-old Jewish atheist/agnostic. I considered myself an iconoclast, smarter than everyone. How could others be so blind that they would give up bacon? Or napping in front of the TV on Saturday afternoon? Or bread for a whole week? After my bar mitzvah, my parents decided to let me decide if I wanted to go to shul. Almost every time, I decided that my bed was too warm to leave.

Then, I came as a teenager. The later years of high school saw a rise in religious attendance: I was dating a girl, and her family went to Kabalat Shabbat services often. Even though I was reciting the words I’ve known since kindergarten, it was clear that I was not there to pray.

Next, I came as a deserter. I was enwrapped by the freedoms of university. At Guelph, sitting in Johnston Hall on that first sweltering day in late August, I found 2-1/2 Jews on my floor of 40, myself included. This was alien to me. Growing up off-Bathurst Street in Toronto, I’d look around the classroom and see 2-1/2 non-Jews! I loved this opportunity to experience other cultures. I wanted nothing to do with the established Jewish groups on campus.

When Hillel and AEPi, the international Jewish fraternity, had their kickoff event in the middle of campus, I walked around three buildings just to avoid them. Even so, when I managed to make a new best friend, it was the other Jew on my floor.

After that, I came with coercion. With first semester over, I was home for the holidays. That meant spending time with my high school friend (my high school persona didn’t engender popularity). He had gone to Ottawa and was not as opposed to being Jewish – he had joined AEPI. He’d decided that I was going to as well, and proceeded to talk my ear off until I agreed to go to a single event and try.

A year later, I was running for chapter president, on a platform to repair relations with our local Hillel so we didn’t split attendance. That brought me into direct contact with Hillel’s director, Rabbi Daniel Levitt. It is written in Pirkei Avot: “Acquire for yourself a teacher, and you will find yourself a friend,” and I know that’s true, because it happened to me.

First, I came to him as a client: I have my organization, you have yours. We should work together.

Then I came to him as a friend: his sessions of Jews and Brews, where a number of students would meet him at the campus pub to discuss Jewish issues, often got derailed and turned into just “peers and beers.”

After that, I came as a favour: Hillel had been missing a secretary at their meetings, and since I was filling the same role in AEPI, Rabbi Daniel asked me to fill in. Why not?

Next, I came to him as a challenger: I took an ethics class. Genocide was a topic we discussed. Aside from the usual Jewish perspective on genocide, I started thinking – my bar mitzvah portion was Beshalach. It features a battle with Amalek. Afterward, Moses is instructed to write “Amalek from under Heaven.” This sounded suspiciously like genocide to my ears. I had trouble reconciling that with Jewish history and went to Rabbi D to throw down that gauntlet. How can you believe in this after what’s happened to us (repeatedly)? An hour of dialogue later, I understood. Amalek, we decided, was not a race, but the yetzer hara; the inclination, not necessarily to do harm, but to be selfish, lazy, ruthless and duplicitous, and we must blot out the inclination to do the wrong thing, even for the right reasons. It resonated with me. After all, it was what I’d been taught my entire life. I left thirsting for more.

Then I came to him as a student: I had never learned about Judaism or Jews in a collaborative way, or a way that allowed for questioning. I had never learned what it was like to debate a rabbi and have him concede. I wanted to do it again. We set up weekly sessions. I would open the Tanach, from Bereshit on, and read until we found something to argue about. Our hour-long appointments often ballooned to two hours.

Rabbi Hillel famously said that the whole Torah was to not do unto others as you wouldn’t want done to you, and the rest was commentary. Yet, most people forget the suffix: “Now go study.” Study we did.

Then I came to him as a guest: his family hosted Shabbat dinners for students at their house every week, and I became a regular. It was always a warm environment, reminding me of my parents’ house, and it was a free hot meal. I started counting him as a friend.

Next, I came as a candidate: Rabbi D let me know that it might be good for Hillel – and for me, too – if I ran for president. Seeing no other challengers and a void to be filled, I gladly accepted his nomination, and after a hard fought campaign against no one, I won.

Two years later, I left him as a brother: we initiated him into AEPI. More than that, he became my mentor. Someone I could talk to about anything. When I got in trouble, I called my rabbi. When I met a girl, I called my rabbi. When my grandparents died six weeks apart, I called my rabbi. When I graduated and got a job with AEPI and he moved on to another Hillel far away and we had to part ways, I called my rabbi to cry our goodbyes.

Even now, whenever I need him, I call my rabbi. Not bad for a Jewish atheist/agnostic.

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Loving lullabies: Yiddish cradle songs as vehicles of maternal expression

MIRA KATZ BLUMENTHAL

Although often overlooked in serious musical scholarship, the Yiddish lullaby is a genre of Jewish folk song that exemplifies the Jews’ tenacity and strength. During the 19th century, the lullaby was a primary vehicle through which Jewish mothers were able to articulate their dreams and aspirations for their children, even under harsh Czarist rule in the Pale of Settlement.

Cradle songs and children’s songs from this time reveal the patterns of life of the Jewish mothers, and reflect the widespread social and religious sentiments of the time.

In her article Nineteenth Century Yiddish Folk Songs of Children in Eastern Europe, Ruth Rubin elucidates the social and economic conditions of the ghettoized Pale of Settlement. She describes how music became a means of emotional expression for both women and children in the Pale. As women were often the primary financial supporters of the family, and children commonly worked to support their parents and siblings, children’s work songs and lullabies from this period reflect the financial hardships of all members of the Jewish families. Lyrics like, “I must work here to keep from starving” offer a clear depiction of the unforgiving environment of the children’s world of work.

Despite these hardships, the lullabies also express a sense of hope. They depict the mothers’ yearnings for their sons to become pious scholars and for their daughters to marry devout intellectuals. Rubin explains, “despite the difficult surroundings and the multiple restrictions imposed upon the child by his adult environment, [the] songs reflect the many facets of his intense life,” which undoubtedly included religion.

The lullabies reveal that, regardless of the economic deprivation of the era, belief in God remained a primary concern and value to the Jews in the Pale. The children’s songs and lullabies that emerged from the Pale indeed reflected the hardships of the restricted lifestyle, but they also revealed the ways in which small freedoms could be achieved through learning and religious devotion.

The Yiddish lullaby is not merely relevant in the context of the Pale of Settlement, however, but is similar to other cradle songs worldwide. Rubin, as well as several other scholars in her field, elucidate the universal qualities of the lullaby. Rubin divides the lullaby genre into two types: natural and unnatural. The natural melodies, such as play songs, counting-out rhymes and chants, have ties to children’s songs elsewhere, whereas the unnatural tunes, such as work songs, school songs and war songs, are specifically Jewish and are “characteristic of an oppressed, persecuted minority.” Rubin offers examples that emphasize the similarities in both structure and lyrics between European Jewish melodies and those of North America, such as a Jewish cradle song that is similar to the popular North American children’s song This Little Piggy.

Bubi, bubi, little house, in Krakow stands a little house. Who lives in it? Yash and Marina.
Three ladies sit spinning. First spins silk, Second spins silver, The third spins gold.

These lyrics are reminiscent of the counting structure of the well-known American children’s song. The author draws upon songs from her Canadian childhood, such as Farmer in the Dell and Pat-a-Cake, to draw a comparison between the songs from the Pale era and those of North America and stress the ubiquitous nature of the lullaby.

The voice of the woman is also a topic that has been investigated cross-culturally. Prof. Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, in her course outline for Teaching Motherhood in History explains that the mother’s role is enigmatic. On one hand, “women’s capacity to bear children...has been crucial to the rationales for barring [women] from public activities and public and private power,” and on the other hand, in many cultures the female’s “histor[ic] responsibility [as] primary caregivers” has been the basis for “particular kinds of female empowerment.” The woman’s position in society is thus ambiguous; the matriarch is at once discriminated against and respected due to her capacity to give birth.

Although Rubin does not explicitly discuss the enigmatic nature of the female, the traditional Jewish notion of the female voice being distracting and lesser than the male’s is implied in her work. In her discussion of Yiddish folk songs, Rubin highlights that the composers of such songs were typically low class. The women who sang cradle songs were often considered “simple folk” who “poured their finest sentiments, their most tender emotions, their most intimate thoughts” into their lyrics.

The supposed subordination of the female voice is in line with the traditional Jewish notion that the man is forbidden to hear the sound of a woman’s voice singing because he will get distracted or aroused. The Talmud explains, the “woman’s voice is a sexual enticement, as is her hair and her leg.”

As such, although the woman is not necessarily considered wholly inferior, her voice is considered a distraction from the study of Torah. Rubin’s contention that the female cradle song composers were often part of the lesser social classes, then, parallels the inequality in Orthodox Judaism, for the woman’s song and voice are both secondary to that of the man.

In a different vein from Rubin’s practical perspective, Judith Kaplan Eisenstein takes a spiritual approach to female involvement in Jewish music. Whereas Rubin carefully outlines the major themes of Yiddish songs and traces the transformations that took place in tandem with socio-historical events, Kaplan Eisenstein considers song as a powerful device that allows the woman to enter into the primarily male dominated world of traditional Judaism.

She argues that as she subjectively explores the music of her own people, she discovers “the raw material for great creation” and a “deep sense of continuity.” Although the two writers have divergent approaches and writing styles, both Rubin and Kaplan Eisenstein contend that the songs of Jewish women are expressive of the women’s thoughts and emotions about the world around them, and are emblematic of Jewish audacity and strength.

Rubin’s contention that the Jews have forever been a singing people regardless of the harshness of their circumstances proves true in her writings. She clearly elucidates how the continuity of the Yiddish lullaby as a genre symbolizes the resilience of the Jewish spirit and the power of the Jewish voice to the mother who suffered quietly as her children grew rapidly and married off, or as her husband moved to America in search of a new life for the family.

It is critical to keep in mind, however, that Yiddish lullabies are not merely reflective of the emotions of an individual mother, but rather a manifestation of the common emotional experiences of a group. They are not merely sweet, crooning tunes with which a mother can lull her child to sleep, but rather a window into the way of life and the personal beliefs of those who compose and sing them. The lullaby acts as a conduit for the dissemination of the social, religious, and political ideals of the performer. When considered from this perspective, the woman is no longer positioned ambiguously as the matriarch of the household who is unjustifiably silenced, but she is given a voice.

This excerpt is part of a larger discussion around the role of the female in Jewish music. For the full version of this essay, please contact Mira Blumenthal at mirablumenthal@gmail.com

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As I sit on the quaking metal floor, ascending 12,000 feet into the air, there’s one question jumping through my adrenaline-flooded mind: what the hell am I about to do? The door slides open and furious winds blast inside. I’m tightly strapped to the instructor I just met – some former IDF soldier called Steve or Zeve or Zev – who I’m expected to trust enough to pull the chute on time to prevent my body from becoming a splattered yolk on the far below land. At least I’ve got a strong grasp on his first name.

He instructs me to scoot over to the edge and let my feet dangle out. “Keep your eyes open,” he calls in his Israeli accent, over the hissing wind. The world below is like an immense quilt of green and yellow patches, vaguely dotted with thousands of microscopic buildings and cars. No turning back now; those dots are about to get a whole lot bigger. Here’s a fun fact: I’m horrified of heights.

Before deciding whether or not I wanted to risk my life for the exhilarating experience of jumping out of a plane, I found myself contemplating what I would actually get out of it. My father, a charismatic personal injury lawyer, would not approve of such an “idiotic excursion.” So why do it? Why would anyone dive face first off the edge of danger and harness their life to the hands of a complete stranger?

There are a lot of opinions out there about the rise of stupid decision-making in my generation. In short, my age group tends to believe we’re invincible, until that invincibility is challenged; we often live without the consideration of consequence.

After the parachute deployed, immersed with thousands of microscopic building and car windows of new views. All you need to do is ignore what’s holding you back and keep your eyes open. Whether you can’t wait to jump out of a plane, or you view skydiving the way my dad does – we should all refuse to let fear control us. Whether you can’t wait to jump out of a plane, or you view skydiving the way my dad does – we should all refuse to let fear control us. As it normally turns out, a little risk can be the appetizer to the main course. You never know what can be served.

With all this said, there is a difference between being adventurous and being reckless. It’s important to remember that our decisions can define us, for good and for bad. Every choice we make has the terrifying ability to change our lives. This can be a blessing as much as a curse.

The experience was more than an elevated perspective carries a meaningful theme in Judaism – unraveling a level of selflessness, provoking an understanding that each life is merely a dot in a much bigger picture. I’m not saying we should forget our problems and attain thoughts of drowning existential insignificance; I’m saying we should live our lives knowing that our problems are not the only problems, that the world we see is not the entire world worth knowing. The experience was more than an opportunity to see my planet in ways I never had: it was a reminder on how I want to live my life.

Skydiving is about letting go of everything you know, everything that makes you feel secure, taking the risk and surrendering to the pull of gravity. The only way to accomplish our greatest aspirations is to pursue that exact same mentality: push beyond the bounds of your life and have faith you don’t end up a splattered yolk.
Finding Judaism in rural Manitoba

SARAH CZOSNIAK

Like many students of my generation, I had difficulty finding a job after graduation. Applying for jobs in my field in the Greater Toronto Area was my full-time job for three months. But when I didn’t receive so much as a call for an interview, I panicked and broadened my search to all of Canada. This led to me accepting the first job offered to me – with a school board in small town Manitoba, population approximately 1,200, and located 20 minutes away from the North Dakota border.

Coming from a graduate program in Montreal and having grown up in Thornhill, Ont., I experienced quite a bit of culture shock upon moving to Manitoba. The Jewish community in Winnipeg is quite large and strong. There are lots of synagogues, a kosher meat shop and a Jewish high school, not to mention the Asper name, which is all over town. But I wasn’t in Winnipeg – I was about 300 kilometres to the south-east.

My new home was in a farming community, and I received several offers for a freshly butchered cow or chicken – neither of which were great options for a kosher vegetarian. I was also shocked by the casual attitude toward hunting and guns. Co-workers laughed at me when I inquired about calling the Children’s Aid Society after a young student received a gun for Christmas. In my defence, in Toronto that would warrant a call to social services!

Being Jewish in my small town wasn’t something I advertised, but it wasn’t a secret either. In fact, it helped me bond with Mennonite friends, who spoke about their people’s history of persecution in Europe. As the grandchild of Polish Jews, I know a thing or two about European oppression. It was also exciting when working with the Hutterite population of the area, who speak a dialect of German similar to Yiddish. As part of a routine assessment, I asked a young student, “What would you do if you went into a room, and it was dark?” He naturally replied, “Shlit!”

Although I never encountered anti-Semitism, there were times when I felt a bit uncomfortable. I had only two vacation days a year, and I had to take both those days in September for Rosh Hashanah, since Jewish holidays aren’t exactly recognized in rural Manitoba. It also became awkward explaining to people why I wasn’t homesick over Thanksgiving weekend – it’s just not a holiday my Jewish family formally celebrates. And I had a hard time defending to a friend why the Jewish use of “Christmas concert” and Easter art decorations bothered me. She saw a difference between Christmas and Easter as religious holidays and as secular holidays on the Canadian calendar, which I did not.

I knew that I wasn’t, as I sometimes joked, the only Jew between Winnipeg and Regina. Brandon, the second-biggest town in Manitoba (population about 46,000) has a handful of Jewish people, including Ukrainians and, of course, Jews. Now that I was a rural prairie Jew myself, I took it upon myself to learn more about the Jewish colonies.

This led me first to Bender Hamlet, Man. After dragging friends down a dirt road off another dirt road, I found a grassy field, with a plaque commemorating the 19 families who built their homes, synagogue and school there, and stayed for 24 years. Apparently there are still some gravestones on the land, but out of fear of trespassing and of ticks, I didn’t investigate further.

More inspiring was the ghost town of Hirsch, Sask. Hirsch is a blink-and-you-miss-it collection of buildings along Highway 18. Apparently there are still some Jews living there (or were, as of a Sept. 16, 2010, article in The CJN entitled “Spotlight on old-timers in small-town Saskatchewan”), but I didn’t see a soul.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants from certain backgrounds were settled in “block settlements,” or villages, of one ethnicity, throughout Western Canada, including Mennonites, Hutterites, Ukrainians and, of course, Jews. Now that I was a rural prairie Jew myself, I took it upon myself to learn more about the Jewish colonies.

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A few kilometres down the road, however, marked with a simple “Point of Interest” road sign, is the surprisingly well-maintained Hirsch Community Jewish Cemetery. Seeing the rows of Jewish gravestones, in Yiddish, English and Hebrew, was enchanting. The bowl of pebbles to place on the stones was a connection to home miles away in Toronto.

Harsh winters, social isolation and poor farming conditions prompted the Jews of Bender Hamlet and Hirsch to leave their farming communities for bigger cities. And after two years in rural Manitoba, I too returned to the big city. But something keeps me coming back to small, fading Jewish communities.

This Yom Kippur, staying with my fiancé in Ireland, I attended shul, not at one of the three congregations in Dublin, but at the synagogue of the Hebrew Congregation of Cork – Jewish population nine, give or take one big-city Canadian visitor.

Sarah Czosniak is a speech language pathologist who is looking forward to getting married this May.
Israel: The outlier of aid in the Middle East

MICHAEL AARENAU

It would seem that whenever the topic of “Israeli foreign aid” comes up, it’s too often an argument about how much Israel receives and rarely is it about how much they give. So let’s recap.

When the destructive Typhoon Haiyan ripped its way through the Philippines in 2013 leaving over 4,000 people dead and countless others homeless and filled with despair, it was Israel who arrived on the scene almost immediately, with 150 IDF soldiers setting up field hospitals with over 100 tons of food and medical aid arriving with them.

Then in 2014 when countries in West Africa were struck by the deadly outbreak of the Ebola virus, it was the State of Israel that not only constructed field hospitals in the affected areas, but also contributed an additional $8.75 million to the cause, with the United Nations declaring that Israel was the top contributor per capita in the fight against Ebola.

And now the world is being forced to witness yet another tragedy, the half-decade long civil war in Syria. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, over 320,000 Syrian civilians have been killed and over 1.5 million have been wounded with no sign of President Assad’s brutality ending any time soon. With this tragic and gruesome civil war comes millions of innocent civilians displaced from their homes, fleeing Syria and looking frantically for any sanctuary and support that they can find.

While the Arab world continues to point fingers at the West for not taking in enough Syrian refugees, perhaps it’s best to look a little closer to home. While countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq have taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees, the wealthy Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have taken in zero refugees while simultaneously profiting from their suffering by selling arms to the rebel jihadist forces and fanning the flames of war (and with Iran taking in zero refugees as well but backing the Assad regime instead).

While the aforementioned nations continue to pad their pocketbooks with the collective pain of millions, it is the State of Israel that is taking action. While the relationship between Israel and Syria hasn’t been a particularly happy one, with the two nations engaging in three major wars (the 1948 Arab Israeli War, the 1967 Six Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War), Israel has once again risen to the occasion to help the helpless, with Israeli NGOs providing food, medicine and clothing to Syrian refugees residing in Jordan since 2013.

Additionally, the Israel Defence Forces have erected a field hospital on the Israeli-Syria border and has begun treating any Syrian refugees who were lucky enough to escape their decimated homeland.

As if this was not enough, Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot stated that the IDF would act in the vicinity of its border to defend Syrian refugees who were trying to escape the barbarity of Islamic State fighters and Syrian military forces.

This truly shows the value that the State of Israel places on human life. Given Syria’s history of mutual disdain, Israel has virtually no reason to show any compassion. However, the sentiment of “never again” and empathy towards the innocent rings true in the heart of most Israelis and so, once again, the nation is only too happy to lend its support.

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The CJN Prize Event

Gathered for food and cocktails before the awards ceremony are, clockwise from top right, MPP Gila Martow, MP Michael Levitt and CJN chief operating officer Tara Fainstein; CJN Prize winner Jasen Sagman with his mother; CJN reporter and event volunteer Sheri Shefa with marketing editor and event co-ordinator Rachel Oliver; and Carl Ehrlich, director of the Israel and Golda Koschitsky Centre for Jewish Studies with York University professor Sara Horowotiz and keynote speaker Barbara Kay.
A festive meal

SHOSHANAH MIRLAS

My family had already anticipated the Rosh Hashanah meal as the delicious smells from the cuisine enchanted the entire house while my mother cooked.

As we do annually, we had invited our cousins and other relatives to join us in the festive meal on the first night of the solemn holiday. When the evening of Rosh Hashanah had at last arrived, 25 people were seated round the long, rectangular table that extended across the dining room floor.

On the table was spread a fine, snow-coloured, silky tablecloth, patterned with an array of designs. It complimented the vibrancy of the napkins, which were painted with different themes of Rosh Hashanah: flowers and pomegranates framed the pictures of a shofar being blown in shul, a group of men doing Tashilch, and a family having their festive meal. The napkins were put at the right side of each plate, and on them were placed exclusive silver cutlery shining magnificently under the brilliance of the crystal chandeliers.

In addition to the water glasses, there were also tall Venetian Murano glasses for the Italian Chianti wine. These Venetian glasses were richly decorated with vivid leaves of every colour, giving the table an os- 

ginous, sparkle, as well as a floral springtime liveness.

We were very hungry and our stomachs showed their lack of patience by grumbling, so once everyone was seated my father began the meal with Kiddush. We then proceeded into the kitchen to wash our hands for the blessing of Hamotzi. There, our eyes wandered to the two lovely platters on which numerous pieces of vazistolma were neatly arranged, looking very impressive. Vazistolma is the Georgian name for vine leaves stuffed with spiced ground beef and rice. It is delicious with my grandmother’s tso – a spicy, sour sauce made of green plums, which is used like ketchup in the Georgian cuisine. But my little brother seemed to be looking in the direction of the enormous pot of potatoes, roasted to perfection, beautifully browned, and waiting to be eaten with chak-hokhibi – spiced chicken cooked in tomato sauce. The kitchen that night was like a casino – drawing you in, and making you want to stay. Despite that, everyone eventually returned to the table where my father recited the blessing of Hamotzi on the large, round, majestic challah, proudly baked by my grandmother and still warm from the oven. Twenty-five impatient faces were watching my father tackle the challah with the knife as fast as he possibly could.

The dominating smells from the kitchen made my mouth water. I began to taste the penetrating flavours of the Khalia – a Georgian beef stew that marinates overnight in various seasonings, such as chopped onions and garlic, coriander, basil, oregano, black pepper, red chilli pepper, salt, tomato paste, and sour plums to deeply absorb the spicy flavours that characterize the dish. Khalia is served with ghomi – cornflower that has a sunny, golden shine when it is cooked in water. But while our noses feasted on the Georgian cuisine, we still had to restrain our appetites as we went through the customary tradition before the feast.

There are certain symbolic foods that we are accustomed to eat on the first night of Rosh Hashanah. For instance, the pomegranate implies that our merits should multiply like its seeds, and dates are eaten for their literal meaning – to go out on dates! The leeks as well as the beets symbolize the destruction of our enemies. As I passed the beets across the table, my cousin made a certain face that distinctly said, “I don’t like beets!”

Next, there was the head of fish, which signifies that we should be like heads and not tails – the fish that was served was a pike caught by my brother in the French River, and stuffed with a secret recipe of my grandmother’s. The apple and honey represented a sweet new year. The apple with honey was without a doubt the tastiest of all the signs. However, as delicious as it was, eating it on an empty stomach, while the captivating aromas tickled the appetite, felt like eating a stale cheese sandwich on dry old bread.

The meal was at last served, and we were finally able to satisfy our burning desires. The atmosphere in the room felt very warm and friendly, but under the deafening noises of the numerous guests, it was definitely not a relaxing atmosphere. Everyone at the table got lost in jolly conversation as we enjoyed each other’s company while we ate. The discussions ranged from the wars in the Middle East to the university programs available at Ryerson.

My five-year-old cousin constantly entertained the company by providing background music like Dip the Apple in the Honey. My grandmother had no shortage of toasts, nor did my father have any shortage of old Soviet jokes. Looking at the adults, anyone could tell how immersed they were in their business chat.

At this point, my older brother blurted out, “Can this table get any more boring than it is?” And off he went, only to return juggling five balls. The spirit of this table was something to be admired. But my mother’s Georgian cuisine was definitely the highlight of the evening.

Shoshana Mirlas is currently taking a gap year in Israel where she is studying Torah and art in Jerusalem.
Sanctity of time

JONAH SIMCHA CHAIM MUSKAT BROWN

The concept of time in Judaism is connected with holiness. In the first instance, the narrative of Genesis, God sanctifies time – He blesses the seventh day, the Sabbath, as an everlasting sanctuary of holiness within time. Many years later, as the Jewish nation prepares to leave Egypt, it is called on by God to initiate time – to sanctify the first moon, thereby blessing each forthcoming month and creating holiness transcendent of time. God creates linear time but offers the Jew the opportunity to take initiation and use his time in a holy manner.

Ecclesiastes best defines linear time as abiding with the order of nature. “A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth endures forever” (Eccles. 1:4-5); it is a continuum in which “there is nothing new under the sun.”

As nature runs its course, God invites the Jew to take a few moments from his day or some time from his busy week to connect with Him in a realm of holiness – whether through prayer, celebration of the Sabbath, or some other prescribed ritual.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in 1963, “Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things in space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time.”

Godliness can only be experienced as a result of preparation, Rabbi Heschel writes, by saying, “Farewell to manual work and learn[ing] to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man.”

The sanctification of the moon and the subsequent establishment of the Jewish calendar, by contrast, allow the Jew to reach even higher. Preparing to conclude more than two centuries of slavery – in which Egyptian society sets out to conquer time by building everlasting monuments of space – God teaches the Jewish nation that time does not have to be limited, that reality does not have remain stagnant in set motion.

God invites the Jew to now be the one to bless time, as if to emphasize that a finite being can take control of his life: constantly growing, just as the moon never remains the same each night. On the Sabbath, God beckons the Jew into a private, intimate relationship with Him. On a monthly basis, and throughout the Jewish festival cycle, however, Jews invite God to dwell amongst them.

Both concepts of time are sacred. The former is constant, while the latter can be spontaneous and voluntary – because in life, individuals need structure and rules, but also opportunities to experience sanctity outside of prescribed everyday occurrences.

On the Sabbath, Jews refrain from physical acts and focus on their essence – their soul, which is metaphysical – because that is the essence of the day. Festivals, however, are called mo’adim, appointed times, because they are times when the Jew decides to invest his soul, his essences, into the days themselves, transforming mundane existence into sacred reality. Whereas on the Sabbath, a Jew becomes a vessel for a Sabbath reality, festivals transform ordinary weekdays into vessels for a new reality – that of sanctity.

Time is a blessing. It is an existence, unlike space, that cannot be altered. Time is a fact of life in which we know nothing of its origins, only that it is in constant motion, always progressing forward like a train with no emergency brake. No human can stop time, but can only choose how to articulate it. Time becomes sacred when utilized for purpose and towards meaning. Life can get busy – very busy at times – and it is through the Sabbath, through prayer, and through other means of detachment from physicality that we come to refocus and remind ourselves why we are acting and why we are living. By contrast, we sometimes find ourselves with too much time, and with confusion about how to fill that time with meaningful pursuits to the extent that we begin making it, “subservient to space.”

We forget that space and time are separate entities and begin filling our time with space, by using physical, mundane matter to occupy our time. But “we can only master time with time. The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.”

The festivals remind us that holiness is a mo’ed – an appointed time designated by a finite being. The sanctity of time is to be found, not in days like the Sabbath, which are blessings in their own right, but rather in mundane moments that human beings decide to elevate and use for holy expression.

Unlike Adam the First in Joseph Soloveitchik’s Lonely Man of Faith, we cannot use nature to conquer time, but rather we must transcend scientific advancements and use time to experience holiness beyond time. Perhaps the challenge that so many experience is that they relied on others, on external realities, to provide a connection to holiness. What they fail to understand is that holiness is internal, that it must be created and sought out for. The Sabbath teaches us that holiness exists within the natural world; the festivals come to teach us that it is up to each individual to seek out sanctity.

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The CJN Prize Event

Guests and CJN staff mingle prior to the awards event.
The saga of the eastern European eshet chayil

JESSICA POLLOCK

Prior to Hitler’s chancellery, approximately nine million Jews were living in the European countries that were subsequently occupied during the course of the war. An abundance of Jews were concentrated in eastern Europe in small villages otherwise known as shtetls. Compared to thriving urban centres such as Budapest and Warsaw, Jewish shtetls were rather backward. In these remote villages, Jews were able to preserve their cultural and religious traditions and speak Yiddish as their native tongue.

On the Jewish Sabbath, Jews around the world routinely sing Eshet Chayil to their mothers. Eshet Chayil translates to a woman of valour, is the archetype of an ideal Jewish mother who is God-fearing, compassionate, tends to the home and is devoted to her husband and children. This portrayal succinctly describes Jewish mothers as the pillars of their communities in pre-Holocaust eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, Jewish women, many of whom were mothers, were susceptible to forms of torture that their female counterparts were not. When being deported to ghettos, Dalia Ofer outlines “a phenomenon of ‘uprootedness’ that was [spawned once women] lost all they had and became refugees in their own city.” This transition was one of the first events that jeopardized their ability to fulfil their role as Nashei Chayil – women of valour. Nevertheless, modes of resistance were frequent in ghettos across eastern Europe. Women who participated in organized resistance movements were typically couriers who “encouraged, organized, searched for safe sites, distributed newspapers... set up partisan bases, developed programs and obtained guns.” Accordingly, many women participated in the momentous Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943.

As rumours spread around eastern Europe of the dreadful conditions in concentration camps, many mothers voluntarily sent their children to hide in non-Jewish homes, convents or with partisans in forests. In one case, a Jewish mother ordered her four-year old son, shoved the young boy to his older brother who was bound for a “safer” camp, Buchenwald. Her young son, Yisrael Meir Lau, would later become the chief rabbi of Israel. In the direst of circumstances, Jewish mothers attempted to protect their children to the ultimate end, even if it jeopardized their own psychological well-being.

Nevertheless, Jewish women, many of whom were mothers, were susceptible to forms of torture that their male counterparts were not. As early as October 1939, Jewish mothers, were generally sent to their death upon entry into concentration camps. Some pregnant women were exempt from death only to become subjects of Nazi medical experiments, undergoing internal mutilation, forced sterilizations and abortions. Jewish women were aware of these risks and many expectant inmates tried to conceal their pregnancies. Some Jewish women who did give birth while incarcerated in camps were impelled to kill their newborn within minutes to resist handing over their baby to the SS. It was circumstances and decisions like these that nearly destroyed the spirits of persecuted Nashei Chayil.

It should now be evident that Nazis consistently and unrelentingly attempted to diminish female inmates’ identities as Jewish women and mothers by inhibiting their ability to fulfil their roles as Nashei Chayil. This essay elaborated upon practices and methods eastern European Jewish women employed to preserve their pre-Holocaust maternal spirit and epitomize true women of valour in the face of their Nazi oppressors.

Jessica Pollock graduated from Western University and Ryerson University where she completed her undergrad and master of professional communication respectively. She is currently working as a social media manager at the Yellow Pages.
Rat

YARDENA KATZ

We move like the mice. We scurry, we zigzag, we wander across the square, bumping into one another in our quest to nowhere. The plaza teems with panic and relief and desperation all at once. Men and women and children run in all directions, eastwards and backwards and into each other’s reedy arms.

We all don the same stripes and have bare scalps. Our clothes smell of the flesh of the dead, though the dead and the living are the same here. The striped uniform rubs against your gentle skin, at first chafing are the same here. The striped uniform rubs against your gentle skin, at first chafing, but it quickly becomes a cherished garment, one that fends off cold and lets the breath of liberation. No relief rolls through empty indifference. They gape. Chocolates and breads and other fine things are distributed, but I crave no physical pleasures.

I roll, tremble, vomit, cower amidst the waves of skeletons who claw and charge towards the chariots of metal. I run barefoot across the numbing blanket of snow and fantasize crawling beneath it. Days pass. Weeks pass.

I am placed on the Soviets’ list of supposed survivors. I am sent to a camp for displaced persons. Its inhabitants are empty, as am I. I linger there for months. I get sent to the port city of Marseilles. I wait for the boat for weeks on end. My life is a series of ticks on a watch. I board the SS Marseilles.

I roll, tremble, vomit, cower amidst the staggering waves like all the pathetic refugees. I befriended no one; I keep to myself. I arrive on Ellis Island.

I am met by the Jewish refugee organization. They hand me a spare pair of clothes and some pocket money. I feel like a thief. I settle in a grimy one-bedroom apartment. It is shared with four other German refugees. I listen to them chant foreign Yiddish verses on the Sabbath.

I find work in a deli store in the Lower East Side.

I keep to myself. I speak little. Nobody knows me. Months pass. Years pass.

It is a chilly evening in January when the knock resounds from the door. I am signing bills, counting boxes, organizing shipments. I am sitting on a stool behind the counter of meat and sauerkraut. I shuffle towards the entrance. A man enters, sweeping in a terrible gust of cold.

“Ah, thank you. You are open now, yes?” Though the hour is late, I nod. I lead him towards the musty counter. He removes his woolen hat and undrapes his thick scarf. In the dim light of the shop, his face comes into view and it is familiar. It chafes at my memory, but I cannot place his face.

“How much for a pound?” His accent is German. So familiar. A flicker of hope suddenly ignites itself, threatens to turn the ash in my heart into gorgeous flame. Could it be – a reunion of brothers, in a deli store miles from home? He looks up. Our eyes meet. I must ask him his name.

He looks deeply into my face. My stiffened features relax. He is my kind. I speak: “Is that you, my brother? From Auschwitz?”

At the utterance of “Auschwitz,” his eyes refocus and lock on mine. He stares. And then his face collapses in a painful contortion; his features warp into a mien of terror. He recoils and wails. And I immediately know I am right. We had met at Auschwitz. But he was no brother of mine.

I ravished his belongings, his children, his dignity. And then, I stole his story. In fear of “liberation” – I dressed like him, I burrowed like him, I scurried like him. I am a Nazi.

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