

The following essay is included in the second Spirited Debate essay collection, “American Jewish Identity and Israel,” and is paired with an essay by Jane Eisner, “Confessions of an Anguished Zionist.” To see all the Spirited Debate essays currently published and continue reading about the PRRUCS Religion & Democratic Renewal project, see [Spirited Debate](#).

## Four Wartime Visits to Israel Reveal a Resilient Nation

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I have traveled to Israel four times since October 7. All told, I have spent a month in Israel during this most recent war. During these trips, I have traveled around the country by bus and train, gone to places tourists don't go, and prayed in synagogues where English was not spoken. In the course of my travels, I have seen a country that is wounded but resilient. The Israeli people may be uncertain about the future of the war, but they are not going anywhere. They are confident in the future of the Jewish people in Israel. And they have resolved to continue being a vibrant and innovative society in the face of terrible tragedies and constant dangers.

Each of my trips has given me insights into a different stratum of life in Israel. My first trip, in November 2023, took place shortly after the brutal Hamas massacre. The nation was still shell-shocked by the torture and slaughter of 1,200 Israelis and the taking of hundreds of hostages. Ben Gurion airport, usually one of the busiest in the world, was a ghost town when I arrived. In my 15 or so previous visits, I had never seen it like that. When I mentioned to a security official my surprise at seeing it so empty, she just gave me a sad shrug.

I had come to attend my nephew's wedding. As I made my way across the country, I was struck by the near ubiquity of firearms. When I first visited Israel in 1974, nearly every adult male seemed to be carrying an Uzi, something that had captivated me as a little boy. On subsequent trips, I observed that the prevalence of gun carrying had fallen (although it never went completely away). After October 7, everyone seemed to be armed. Even the wedding singer had a .45 on his hip, and it was not a gangsta-rap affectation. For the friends and family at the event, there was a shared need to

celebrate in the midst of tragedy, recognizing that not celebrating would be a victory for Hamas and all those who seek Israel's destruction.

This trip also coincided with the first ceasefire and the release of 105 hostages, which unified Israelis in joy and relief. Sadly, there has not been another release since then, and we keep hearing awful news about the tragic and barbaric execution of many of the hostages.

I returned to Israel two months later on business for a series of briefings for Yeshiva University's Straus Center about the state of the war. Over four days in January at Jerusalem's Menachem Begin Heritage Center, the other attendees and I listened to religious, political, and military experts, trying to get a picture of what was happening and what the prospects of resolving the conflict were.

The hotel I stayed at on this visit was filled with refugees from the north. They had been forced out of their homes by the constant barrage of Hezbollah missile attacks from Lebanon—an area that was supposed to be demilitarized, per an (ineffectual) United Nations resolution. Children wandered the halls, parents dried their laundry on second-floor balconies, and the men, none of whom spoke English, prayed in a hotel synagogue in a service that was both familiar and foreign to me. While I was there, nine soldiers were killed while fighting in the Gaza Strip, the largest single-day casualty total in the war up to that point. The resolve to continue to prosecute the war remained, but there was also a growing recognition that this war was not going to end anytime soon.

In June 2024, I returned once again for the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. The country seemed in some ways somewhat back to normal. The airport and cafés were bustling once again. Thousands were at the beach on a Saturday when it was announced that four hostages had been rescued in a daring raid, leading to enormous cheers among the beachgoers. In a show of unity, nonreligious people notified religious neighbors, who could not check the news on the holy Sabbath, of this great achievement.

On that visit I also went to the south, to the site of the Nova festival. The losses there were staggering. Hundreds of placards showing young victims with the faces of angels were arranged in rows, confronting visitors with the devastation of the war. My knees buckled at the enormity of the slaughter. I then went with my cousin to visit Kibbutz Nirim, near the Gaza border. Since October 7, she has been exiled from her home of four decades, and she took me on a tour of the destruction

there. Unlike in some of the surrounding communities, in Kibbutz Nirim, the barbarians had sacked only some of the land, but the devastation in the affected area was total. She took me on a tour of each house, carefully explaining the impact of every scorch mark and bullet hole, telling me which of her friends had been killed or wounded by each blow. When I returned and told an Israeli friend that I had taken the bus to Beer Sheva to visit the scene of the attacks, he shook his head in surprise, saying, “That’s not very American of you.”

My most recent visit was in August. I arrived in Israel as Iran was threatening a military strike. Friends in America could not believe I was going. One asked if I was aware of the looming World War III. A second said sarcastically, “Great timing, dude.” Yet once again, I went, traveled widely, and felt safe moving around. The people living there were in good spirits despite the bellicose language from Iran and its launch of more than 300 missiles and drones just a few months earlier. Gallows humor was common: social media influencer Arsen Ostrovsky joked, “Calories, *shmalories*. If there’s gonna be Armageddon, I may as well go all out on the chocolate ruggelach.”

During the trip, I went to the thriving city of metropolis of Modiin, built in the 1990s and now home to 100,000 people. It’s an impressive and well-run city in which religious and secular Jews, immigrant and native-born, live together in harmony. I also saw Israel’s gorgeous national library in Jerusalem, home to four million books, including some priceless treasures from antiquity, some of which had been buried deep underground to protect them in case Iran’s threat of attack was realized.

Our tour guide at the library made a special point to show us the prayer rooms that were available to employees and visitors, with accommodations made for both Jewish and Muslim worshippers. She also emphasized that many of the library’s top staff are Arabs, something that is true across Israeli society. In the medical profession, for example, 25% of doctors, 30% of nurses, and 60% of pharmacists are Israeli Arabs. Israeli Arabs have full rights in Israel, including voting rights and the ability to purchase land, a courtesy not extended to Jews by Palestinians. In fact, Palestinians who do sell land to Jews are frequently murdered by their so-called brethren, and the only Jews allowed to be in Gaza are the hostages taken there by force. Otherwise, Gaza, which was once home to 9,000 Jews, is *Judenrein*, that is, completely devoid of Jews. With Israel’s 2005 withdrawal from Gaza,

coupled with the current exile of 70,000 Israelis from Israel's north, the 21st century has unfortunately been a century of contraction, in stark and sad contrast to the 20th century's period of expansion.

Toward the end of this, my fourth trip, I mentioned to my brother, who lives in Israel, that something big always seemed to be happening on my trips—the hostage deal, the hostage rescue, the Iranian warnings. His response: “That’s because something big is always happening here.”

This sense that something big is always happening shapes Israeli attitudes. There’s always a threat looming, which both weighs on people but also creates a sense of resilience. Still, there’s little disagreement among Israelis as to where the greatest danger lies. Political opponents may want to make unfavorable policy changes. Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran want to kill them.

We saw this quite starkly on October 7. The loss of life on that day was staggering—and the costs of reestablishing long-term peace in the days since have been high. A nephew of mine in his early 20s has lost over a dozen friends in this war. I have a cousin who grew up on a kibbutz in the south and became a financial planner. Because of her background, her client base consisted of residents of the southern kibbutzim, the ones hardest hit on October 7. She lost 38 clients on that one day. Where does one even begin to process devastation like that? Some of these clients had wills, some didn’t. Some others were taken hostage, others horribly wounded. Of the rest, few if any have been able to return home to their kibbutzim in the south. My cousin needs to sort through all of this, in addition to navigating the pain of so many lost friends and a devastated community.

Hamas’ atrocities on October 7, coupled with the group’s stated desire to do it “again and again,” are a reminder of what the nation faces. These hard realities also make me skeptical of those visiting Israel who claim that they fear their political opponents more than they fear Israel’s external enemies. Simply put, Israel’s enemies have not wavered in their decades-long thirst to destroy the Jewish state. They are not seeking compromise or territorial concessions—they just want the nation and people gone. Israeli protesters and counter-protesters, in contrast, have differing visions for the Jewish state. One may not agree with them, and may even dislike their tactics, but they are not comparable in any way to Israel’s mortal and violent enemies.

It's important to remember that Israel's enemies are also America's enemies. "Death to Israel" chants are invariably paired with "Death to America" chants. The difference is that America is a vastly more powerful nation, with over 300 million people, 7,000 miles away, and neighbors who don't call for the destruction of the nation. Those who chant for America's end do not have the capacity to bring it about directly. But Iranian mullahs, who speak about Israel as a "one-bomb" country, do potentially have that capacity when it comes to Israel.

It should be noted that the anti-Israel, pro-Hamas protesters in America also chant "death to America." They threaten Jewish students on elite campuses in America, and I fear them more than I fear protesters or counter-protesters, of whatever persuasion, in Israel. American college radicals are both tearing down American campuses and making Jews unwelcome at many top institutions. In doing so, they are immeasurably more harmful to Jews, America, and the West than protesters in Israel.

For all of these reasons, I question the decision to come to Israel as a non-Israeli and protest the government. I don't question the *right* to do so much as the *wisdom* of doing so. The West, the United States, and Israel face far greater dangers and far greater threats.

Another problem with making proclamations about a country based on attending a protest—participating in protest tourism, if you will—is that it leads one to judge a nation by its extremes. The vast majority of Israelis just want to live their lives in safety. They want to build, not to destroy. This is in stark contrast to Hamas, which aims to kill Israelis, Jewish and Muslim alike, and sees Palestinian deaths and suffering as benefits in its PR war against Israel.

Hamas has had control of Gaza for nearly two decades. It could have built a thriving economy, a tourist destination, an agricultural success story. Instead, it chose to build rockets and a network of terror tunnels more extensive than the London Underground. Meanwhile, it let its people suffer. Israel, in contrast, has worked despite the dangers around it to build a start-up nation, a land of biomedical innovation and technological marvels. Nothing has stopped Hamas from taking a similar approach—other than its relentless hatred of Jews and their commitment to direct international aid to destroy Israel when the terrorists aren't lining their own pockets.

What I have seen in my travels is a country of rich diversity that is in pain but nevertheless resilient and free. Israel is innovative and vibrant in ways that its neighbors and most other countries around the world are not. It's also a country that faces constant—and potentially existential—security threats. It is trying to cope with these challenges in the best way a democracy can: with robust debate that welcomes new information and recognizes differences of opinion. Most of all, Israel is living its highest ideals in a way that is more humane than any of its neighbors, and more confidently than the United States or Western European countries would under similar circumstances.

I don't claim to know Israel as well as its citizens do, and I am skeptical of the Tom Friedman “talk to a cab driver” method of visiting a country. But I do know that the country I have seen in my four visits is a country I do not see or recognize in claims that the biggest danger the country faces is from protesters or counter-protesters at political rallies. The fact is that someone who goes to Israel to participate in protests is looking for problems, while the bigger concern for Israelis is that terrorists are looking for you. I firmly believe that Israel will get through this challenging period and return to the hard work of building a raucous, dynamic, and creative country in a challenging neighborhood. As for Israel's death-worshipping enemies, I lack a similar hope.

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