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The Jerusalem Report®

JUNE 27, 2018

COVERING ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST & THE JEWISH WORLD

The future of the Jews

Amotz Asa-El's award-winning series
on the five transitions of Jewish existence



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FROM THE EDITOR

The B'nai B'rith Award

PERHAPS THE biggest compliment *The Jerusalem Report's* senior editor, Amotz Asa-El, received at the B'nai B'rith World Center-Jerusalem Journalism Award Ceremony at the Konrad Adenauer Conference Center on June 5, was a woman coming up to him and saying, "You are a sane voice in a mad world." Asa-El won the award for print journalism "recognizing excellence in Diaspora reportage in memory of Wolf and Hilda Matsdorf" for his five-part in-depth series on transitions in the Jewish experience: Geography, Solidarity, Faith, Hate, Genius.

Because we think it is such an important series, as reiterated by one of the judges, Prof. Gabriela Shalev, we are reprinting all five stories in this issue of *The Report* for historical record. In his acceptance speech, Asa-El noted that Fred Friendly, the legendary CBS president who was dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism at which he studied, had called journalism "the first rough draft of history." Asa-El added, poignantly, "That's what I seek to do every day, and that's what I sought to do in this series of articles. I can only hope that Professor Fred Friendly, from his heavenly heights, agrees with the jury of the B'nai B'rith Award that I fulfilled my mission."

Yair Sherki, the religious affairs reporter for the Israel News Company (formerly Channel 2), won the broadcast media prize for his incisive five-part series, "Brooklyn Shel Kodesh" on the ultra-Orthodox community in Brooklyn, New York, while a Certificate of Merit in memory of Luis and Trudi Schydowsky was conferred on Benny Teitelbaum, the Jewish world correspondent at the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation, Kan 11, for four TV news reports on French and ultra-Orthodox immigrants to Israel and on an emotional mission to Israel by North American Jewish mothers.

Besides Shalev, the award jury comprised Prof. Yehudith Auerback, Prof. Sergio Della-Pergola, Ambassador Sallai Meridor, and journalists Yair Sheleg and Asher Weill. In his introductory remarks, B'nai B'rith World Chairman Dr. Haim V. Katz called keynote speaker Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow for Middle East



Amotz Asa-El

Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former US national security advisor, "an American patriot who loves and supports Israel." Over recent years, Katz said, we have witnessed a growing gap between American Jews and Israel, and B'nai B'rith is working on a plan to address what he called "this deepening crisis," especially among youth losing connection to Israel and the Jewish people.

In his address, titled "Israel and American Jews: A Portrait at 70," Abrams said he was delighted to be back in Jerusalem, "but you know this is a pleasure that the majority of American Jews have never had, not once."

Lamenting that at least 60 percent had not visited Israel, he suggested that the key remedy to the problem of American Jews and Israel drifting apart is significant investment in Jewish education. While Israel had for seven decades depended on the support of the Diaspora – and especially the American Jewish community – it has now become the center of world Jewish life, and "not a recipient of aid from, but a donor to Diaspora Jews."

"You exist as a haven, with a Law of Return, but that is the beginning and not the end, surely, of Israel's role in the lives of Jewish communities around the world," Abrams said. "For Israel, today, celebrating 70 years, even the Jews in the United States now live in one of those smaller Diaspora communities that will inevitably look to Zion for inspiration, for assistance and for a guide to our common future as Jews."

Steve Linde

Send letters by email to: jerusalemreport@gmail.com. Please include your full postal address. The editor reserves the right to edit letters as appropriate. Priority will be given to brief letters that relate to articles in the magazine.



Avital's tragedy – and triumph

ON THURSDAY evening, September 4, 2014, Avital Rokach was preparing to go to a concert of Israel's legendary singer, Shlomo Artzi. At around 5 p.m., her husband, from whom she had long been separated, hid in ambush in the hallway of her small apartment building. When Avital left her apartment, Shmuel attacked her and stabbed her to death. Her pleas to him to stop went unheeded. Avital left behind two boys and her youngest daughter, Tamar Ben David.

Tamar was raised in a traditional lower-class family in Jerusalem. The economic situation in the family was always difficult, but even though she recalls there was even a time that they had no refrigerator, Tamar never felt she lacked because of the love and protection she received from her mother.

Tamar is not just a statistic or a name in a newspaper to me. We are in the same class at Shalem College in Jerusalem. We disagree on just about everything. She is an anti-Zionist, radical feminist activist who considers herself an anarchist. I am a Zionist Israeli who was raised in a settlement in Judea.

Despite our differences, we became good friends. Even without the horrific murder of her mother by her father (whom she refuses to acknowledge as her father), Tamar has more "skeletons" in her closet than most human beings collect in their lifetime. She has "come out of the closet" twice, once declaring she is bisexual and a second time identifying herself as a woman, despite being born biologically a male. She is one of the leading LGBTQ activists in Jerusalem and fights against male controlled institutions that she believes abuse their power by dominating the weaker elements in society.

As trust grew between us, I asked if she would be willing to be interviewed and share her story. She agreed, but requested that her mother, her hero, be the subject of the story rather than her. She also suggested the interview be conducted "somewhere you've never been before."

So there we were, Tamar and I, in a small vegan bar in downtown Jerusalem, full of political/ideological stickers against the occupation and for animal rights. I felt out of place. That is another gap between us – her safe zone is for me a discomfort zone.

Tamar filled me in on her family history. Avital was only 14 when she met her husband. They married at a young age. Avital quickly lost her innocence as Shmuel beat her. His violence was aimed at the children as well. Tamar recalls how Shmuel dislocated her jaw when she was in the ninth grade. "But you know what was worst, Matan? It was the emotional violence. His endless manipulations, the way he humiliated my mother, beat her and then told her he couldn't live without her."

Needless to say, this horrible man was not accepting of Tamar's way of life and would humiliate her about her identity. I asked if she thought her father's character was one of the things that made her feel distanced from men and eventually become queer. "I don't think that is the direct reason," she responded. "My life and the decisions I made reflect the accumulation of many of the things I experienced over the years. But my father's image definitely stands as a beacon to the reason I do not trust men."



Tamar Ben David

COURTESY

Dozens of women are murdered annually in Israel, right under the eyes of the institutions whose mandate it is to protect them. Throughout the interview I wondered, could this murder have been avoided?

How does a woman in the 21st century, in the capital of the Jewish state, find herself beaten, humiliated, threatened and isolated with no one to aid her? This murder could have been stopped. Our institutions are not protecting these women from their partners.

Avital struggled as best she could. For years she begged the rabbinical court in Jerusalem to allow her to leave her husband, but he refused her a get.

More hearings were scheduled as more time elapsed. Though she left her husband, Avital was not free. She was held captive to halachic procedures with no sympathy toward her whatsoever.

I asked her, "What about the judges and police?" Tamar laughed sarcastically: "He [Shmuel] was arrested a couple of times, but released after questioning, despite his record of years of violence and divorce refusal." The judges were merciful to the violent man, but Avital was left to stand alone.

Throughout the interview, Tamar elaborated on her mother's special character and her love of animals, a trait Tamar also has. Avital was a strong woman who did everything in her power to become a free woman. Ironically, Shmuel was scheduled a few days after the murder to be brought in handcuffs to give Avital the get she yearned for, to enable her to go on with her life. Instead, on that Thursday night, as Tamar was riding home on a bus from her community service, she received a call that could have been avoided: "Your mother was murdered."

Shmuel was arrested soon after, his hands stained with the blood of Tamar's mother. He continues to psychologically manipulate the court system and his family, dragging out the procedures. He is charged with first-degree murder.

I sat shaking in that Jerusalem coffee shop. On the one hand, I admired Tamar's ability to tell her story, but on the other, I was sad about the society in which I live. I asked Tamar if she has lost hope in humanity. In her mind, she separates hope and optimism. She is not an optimist. It is so easy for human beings to turn evil, to arouse the animal instincts that reside in us all. But there is hope. And there is a struggle, to fix what is wrong in society. "I know my mother would be proud of me that I care about this world, this world that was so evil to her."

We ended the interview; Jerusalem was already dark and rainy, matching the tragedy I had just heard. But these words were written in Jerusalem daylight. I hope that Avital's story serves as a reminder: Though we may not necessarily fix the rage of a violent man, we can fix the lapses in our social system. The police force must have more tools to protect these women. And there must be checks and balances from our courts over the rabbinical system. Avital and Tamar's struggle should be all of ours. ■

The writer is cofounder of Speakup, a public speaking and political consulting firm

Mazal tov, Amotz Asa-El!

The announcement that Amotz Asa-El is the winner of the B'nai Brith Award 2018 for Journalism (May 14) for his five-part series on the situation of the Jewish people today gives me the chance to convey my congratulations to both him and *The Jerusalem Report*. A biweekly allows for the publication of long-reads, and The Report outdid itself by publishing a serial story of five long-reads in August and September 2017, all of them by the same excellent author and editor, offering its readers a magnificent series.

Asa-El has identified the challenges the Jewish people face and put them in their historical context. Incredibly erudite, he circles like a drone over Jewish history, overviewing long trends and at the same time zooming in on individual events and persons. There is a delicate balance between the historical facts and trends he describes on the one hand and his own programmatic views on the other, which renders a wonderful dynamic. Future writers on the same subjects can borrow from his articles. I would say that any new publication on the history of antisemitism cannot do better than copying the two paragraphs with which Asa-El opened his September 4, 2017 article on "Herzl's unfulfilled vow."

"It was war by other means. Frustrated by their failure to convert them, Christians set out to deface the Jews and defame their faith. The success of the consequent effort transcended anything its originators could have imagined, inspiring a multipronged attack that eventually harnessed legislatures, kings, armies, literati and mobs while crossing continents, lasting centuries and killing multitudes."

Here is a historian who has mastered the art of journalism to the full. The articles are not mere description. Asa-El proposes a solution to the predicament of the Jewish people today. Inspired by the spiritual or cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, and based on the success-story of political Zionism, his vision is the creation of a spiritual and academic center in Israel, where young people from the Diaspora can come and study for full academic degrees. In those houses of learning, Israel and the Diaspora can meet, mix, energize and build a common Jewish denominator. The idea is not only sympathetic, but seems quite feasible as well.

Thomas Simon
Alkmaar, The Netherlands

Trip to Theresienstadt

I was born in the USA and grew up during the 1950s and 1960s. My grandparents were born in the USA, their parents having immigrated during the late 19th century. Growing up in the metropolitan New York area where there was a large Jewish population, I knew no one who was a Holocaust survivor or who had a parent who was a Holocaust survivor. The secondary school curriculum in New Jersey at that time dealt overwhelmingly with US history, politics and geography, and I learned little about anywhere else.

My family was active in a synagogue, and I attended religious school, but I remained quite ignorant of international affairs until I enrolled at McGill University in Montreal. At McGill I realized how ignorant I was of world history/politics/geography and general world affairs. In Montreal at that time there was a significant Holocaust survivor population, and I met Holocaust survivors for the first time, the parents of a friend.

After graduating from McGill in 1969, my husband (a native Montrealer) and I moved to Toronto, where we met many Holocaust survivors, generally parents of friends. I studied education at the University of Toronto and became a secondary school history teacher. The Ontario curriculum at that time included Holocaust studies as well as a more expansive view of the world. I certainly think Canadian students would have a much better world view than many students educated in the USA.

Zoe Singer's article "My Trip to Theresienstadt" (April 2) touched me significantly. I was troubled in particular by her story of the American staff member who was opposed to using the term "Holocaust," believing "it happened... get over it." How very sad.

With fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors still alive, it is incumbent on us and our children and grandchildren to ensure that knowledge of the Holocaust does not die with the survivors. The Shoah must continue to be taught and Jews and non-Jews must learn from this History.

Joanne R. Fisher
Vancouver, Canada

Dr. Daod's view on migrants

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" The words of Hillel remind us that the nation-state of the Jews must remain a

Jewish-majority country. Israel simply cannot absorb an unlimited number of migrants who have no connection to Judaism. (People who legitimately achieve Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return, despite not being Jewish according to Halacha, are a different concern. The rabbinate should be facilitating the conversion of those who wish to convert, not putting obstacles in their path.)

"If I am only for myself, what am I?" Hillel also reminds us that we need to show concern for others. But this does not mean that Israel must solve the world's refugee crisis on its own, or that its contribution to the cause must be to absorb large numbers of migrants who not only have no connection to Judaism, but who may also have been raised in societies in which Jews were vilified and the murderers of Jews were idolized. As Dr. Daod points out ("Essam Daod: Making migrants whole," May 28), it is traumatic for people to be transported to new lands where they need to adapt to new customs, learn new languages and live among people with different religions.

Dr. Daod marvels that today's displaced persons nonetheless risk death to arrive in new places where, if they manage to survive, they will surely face the traumas he describes. I believe that they undertake these risks, in part, because they see that their leaders of the Muslim world have kept millions of people in refugee limbo for 70 years. They have refused to rehabilitate the descendants of Arabs who fled an Arab-initiated war, despite the fact that those Palestine refugees, living relatively short distances from the land their forebears fled, among people with whom they share language, religion and ethnicity, should have been the world's easiest refugee population to be resettled.

Israel is doing its share, not by taking in migrants, but by assisting many poor countries to improve their agriculture and economies. Instead of criticizing Israel for not taking in more people, the world should be insisting that Muslim nations stop preaching hatred of the other, stop funding Islamist terrorism, and begin devoting their resources to the improvement of their own peoples' lives. They need to abandon their dream of having Israel overrun by Muslims who've been brainwashed into hating Jews and agree to rescind their laws barring Palestine refugees from citizenship.

Toby F. Block
Atlanta, Georgia



Israel-Diaspora relations now and then

WOLF MATSDORF (of blessed memory) was a journalist and German-Jewish Zionist who first fled to Australia before making aliya with his wife Hilda later in life. Wolf saw wonders in the development of the State of Israel and identified with the B'nai B'rith World Center—Jerusalem's mandate to forge closer relations between Israel and the Diaspora. When we set out to challenge and honor journalists to share the stories of the Diaspora in the Israeli media, Wolf served as our inspiration and today the honor bears his name.

For the past 26 years, the B'nai B'rith World Center—Jerusalem has been conferring its Award for Journalism Recognizing Excellence in Diaspora Reportage. As the initiator of the project, my motivation was to establish a project that would appropriately memorialize Wolf, and also serve to honor those who build bridges through healthy media dialogue.

Dozens of journalists have been honored with the award and it has grown into the most prestigious prize of its kind in Israel. We engage a blue-ribbon jury and an outstanding keynote speaker each year. The award and its awardees have managed to break through as a beacon of excellence in a crowded media landscape.

However, times are changing. In recent years we have anxiously observed what could be a related and perhaps even mutually-nurturing phenomena. On the one hand, we have seen a marked decrease in the number of Israeli journalists dedicated to providing in-depth coverage of Diaspora communities and the state of Israel-Diaspora relations. On the other, we have seen an increase in hyper-criticism by segments of Diaspora Jewry, particularly in the United States. This criticism has exposed a crisis of identity and solidarity between the Jewish State and the largest Jewish Diaspora community.

The issues under contention are many and span the full gambit of religion, human rights, diplomacy and "Occupation." Today, even security issues – which until recently had been left to the prerogative of Israelis who bear the immediate burden of any security-related decision here – have become a point of contention.

The outcome is the emergence of a great rift. Today, some political leaders and media relations practitioners are advising the Israeli government to cease considering the wishes and attitudes of American Jews and instead spend political capital on fostering closer relations with Christian Evangelicals. These are the same Evangelicals who have been behind some of the most positive diplomatic and strategic developments for Israel in recent memory. They helped to assure the election of demonstratively pro-Israel American administration which has relocated the US Embassy to Israel's declared capital Jerusalem and decertified the JCPOA (the Iran nuclear deal) and defends Israel to the hilt in the United States to name a few areas of support.

Trends in the United States also show that support for Israel is now increasingly a partisan issue. American Jews, concentrated as they are in heavily Democratic states, do not hold the electoral influence to determine the outcome of an election or major policy decisions. In addition, as smaller Jewish communities in Europe and Latin America shrink due to assimilation and intermarriage, Israel



From left: Yair Sheleg, Sergio DellaPergola, Elliott Abrams, Amotz Asa-El, Yair Teitelbaum, Yair Sherki, Yehudith Auerbach, Gabriela Shalev, Sallai Meridor, Dr. Haim V. Katz and Alan Schneider

will be operating in a radically evolved environment in the coming generation where the U.S. and Israel serve as the two central homes for Jews.

Now marking 175 years of dedication to Israel and the Jewish People, B'nai B'rith cannot, and will not, adopt a defeatist attitude about US or world Jewry. We can and must find ways of speaking among Jews as among family. B'nai B'rith will prioritize words and deeds that heal and connect alongside those who might hurt and draw us apart. Many overt and covert enemies of both Israel and the Jewish world would like nothing more than to see us leave each other behind.

We are not alone. McGill University Prof. Gil Troy, in his new book *The Zionist Ideas* seeks to foster a broad revival of the Zionist ethos. In addition, unprecedented financial investment by the Israeli government in Diaspora Jewry also seeks to bind us together across the globe.

Though we must determine which words and deeds clearly fall outside the very broad tent that our communities have pitched, we must work to embrace as many Jews as possible. This is the precise purpose of our award for journalism.

We will continue to encourage the Israeli media to go the extra mile in sharing the reality of Diaspora communities with the Israeli public to build bonds of familiarity, identification and ultimately solidarity. The winners of this year's awards – The Jerusalem Report's own Amotz Asa-El, Israel News Company's Yair Sherki and KAN's Benny Teitelbaum – have done precisely that. We are proud to honor the unique way each has decided to focus on the powerful stories of the Diaspora and how each has used their platforms to interpret them for the Israeli public. ■

The writer is Director of the B'nai B'rith World Center—Jerusalem



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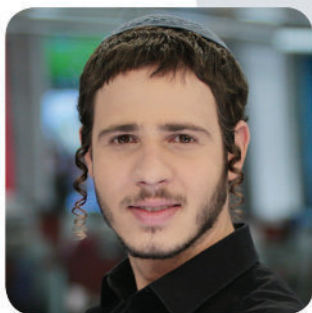
The 26th Annual B'nai B'rith World Center Award for Journalism for 2018

Recognizing Excellence in Diaspora Reportage
In Memory of Wolf and Hilda Matsdorf



Award Winners

for broadcast media:



Yair Sherki
(Israel News Company)

for print media:



Amotz Asa-El
(Jerusalem Report)

Certificate of Merit

in Memory of Luis and Trudi Schydlofsky



Benny Teitelbaum
(KAN 11 - Public Broadcasting Corporation)



Keynote Address

Israel and American Jews: A Portrait at 70 Elliott Abrams

Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign
Relations; former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor



Opening Remarks

Dr. Haim V. Katz

Chairman, B'nai B'rith World Center



Journalism Award Jury

Mr. Asher Weill (Chair), Dr. Yehudith Auerbach, Prof. Sergio DellaPergola,
Ambassador Sallai Meridor, Prof. Gabriela Shalev and Mr. Yair Sheleg



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