



"If the sword falls from our hands, our lives will be cut short."

Moshe Dayan, Zionism's view of history, and the heartbreaking parallels between Israel and the Diaspora

Daniel Gordis January 24



All photos IDF spokesperson

2022 has started out terribly for the IDF. All four of the young men above have been killed since January 1, none of them in encounters with an enemy.

Major Chen Fogel (upper left) and Lt. Col. Erez Saychani (upper right) were killed when they crashed into the Mediterranean, just off of Israel's coast. Their helicopter was in the midst of a complex night-time maneuver when a fire broke out in one of the engines, cutting all electricity in the chopper, which then hit the water. One other soldier survived and tried desperately to extricate his friends, but to no avail. It is still unclear why the other two were unable to exit the chopper once it hit the water, since the crash-landing on the water was apparently executed perfectly.

Then, merely nine days later, another tragedy. Major Itamar Elharar (lower left) and Major Ofek Aharon (lower right) were killed near their base in the Jordan Valley when they went to search for whoever it was who had stolen expensive gear from the base. A certain Officer N also went looking for the thief and the equipment, but the two searches apparently did not know about each other. Given the level of danger in the area, adrenaline was flowing and fear was palpable. In the dark of night, Officer N heard the others, assumed they were terrorists and opened fire. He killed two of his friends, fellow officers in Egoz, one of Israel's most vaunted commando units.

Training accidents, even horrible ones, aren't unheard of here. But still, you never quite get used to them. Our own kids are all out of the army, so the pervasive sense of dread that hovered everywhere for years (one of ours was

in a commando unit for eight years) has dissipated. Nonetheless, news that there has been a training accident in “an elite unit” and that soldiers “have been shot” is code you still understand. “Have been shot” without details usually means they’re dead, or soon will be. The army just needs time to get to the families.

And then begin the mind games. It’s not our kids, that much we know. But maybe the kids of one of our friends? Cousins? A neighbor? A sibling or a husband or a fiancé of one of our students? This is a small country, often with few degrees of separation.

Their rank can make it challenging to remember how young these kids are. “Major” Itamar Elharar makes him sound like he was older than he really was. Until you see the picture of him and his wife of two years.



It's not "officers." It's lives cut short, families shattered beyond repair. The woman who is far, far too young to be a widow, families at whose Shabbat table there will forever be a missing voice. Officer N, whose life is ruined.

When this happens in an elite unit, the country gets worried. How did all those mistakes (which there's no point enumerating here) happen? The news is adrift in worry about what's happening to the IDF. Take a look at this [headline from N12](#), an online Israeli news site, referring both to the tragedy above and to another very close call a few days later involving a grenade, in which soldiers were thankfully only wounded, and not killed.

The headline reads: **“Not just Iran and Hamas: The Chief of Staff has other reasons to be worried.”** And the subtitle: **“The open questions surrounding the incidents in the IDF’s elite units.”**



N12 also posted a photograph of IDF investigators combing the coast near the site of the helicopter crash, with the two faces of the two lost officers inserted. The grainy photograph is less interesting than the caption:

“A reminder to all of us that the IDF is engaged in dangerous things, every single day.”

That “reminder” is an exceedingly benign formulation of what then IDF Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan, said in a 1956

eulogy for Roi Rotberg, who had been killed along the Gaza border. Dayan's brief eulogy, which we'll examine in detail in a separate column in April (the anniversary of the funeral), has become an iconic Israeli speech, something akin to the Gettysburg address, though with a very different message.

... without the steel helmet and the cannon's muzzle we will not be able to plant a tree or build a house.¹ ... **Millions of Jews, who were murdered because they had no land, gaze at us from the dust of Jewish history; they have commanded us to return home and to rebuild a land for our people.**

Let us not fear to look squarely at the enmity that is inseparable from and fills the lives of hundreds of thousands of Arabs who live around us. ... Let us not drop our gaze, lest our arms be weakened. Such is the fate of our generation. This is the choice at the heart of our lives: to be ready and armed, strong and unmovable—or else the sword will fall from our hands and our lives will be cut short.

Centuries earlier, Abner, the commander of the biblical King Saul's forces, asked Yoav, the captain of David's men: **"Must the sword devour forever?"** Moshe Dayan, who commanded Jewish forces in the very same region millennia later, answered Abner's question without hesitation. "Yes."

The decision to live by the sword was not embrace of the sword. It was an embrace of one sort of fear over another, an embrace of the fear of going to war over the older form of fear that had become ubiquitous in Jewish life. That fear was the fear of victimhood, the exhaustion that comes from always being on guard, simply because you're a Jew.

Zionism, in many ways, was born of that exhaustion.

Chaim Nachman Bialik was only nineteen years old when, after the publication of his first poem, he was recognized for his unique ability to capture the brokenness of Jewish souls.

The narrator of the poem, titled "**To the Bird**," speaks to a bird that has just landed on his Eastern European windowsill, having returned from the warm climes of Palestine. (I've omitted a few stanzas here, for brevity.)

Welcome upon your return sweet bird,
From the warm countries to my window -
How my soul longs to hear your pleasant voice
in winter when you leave my dwelling.

Sing, tell, dear bird,
From a land of wondrous distance,
**are the troubles and suffering great
there too in the warm and beautiful land?**

Do you bear me greetings from my brethren in Zion,
From my distant yet close brethren?
Oh happy ones! **Do they know**

That I suffer, ho suffer pain?

**Do they know how plentiful my memories are here,
How many, so many rise against me?**

Sing my bird, wondrous things from a land,
Where spring dwells for ever.

Do you bear me greetings from the song of the land,
From the vales, and tops of the mountains?

Has God had pity and has comforted Zion?

Or is it still abandoned to its graves?

Does the dew descend as pearls on Mount Hermon?

Does it come down and fall like tears?

And how is the Jordan and its clear waters?

And how are the mountains, the hills?

There is an idyllic place, imagines the narrator, a place he's never seen, but that he knows from the images from the Bible. It's a place where dew descends like pearls on Mount Hermon, a land where spring dwells forever. A place where, Bialik imagines, the pain of Jewish life in Europe does not hover.

America is nothing like Europe was back then, except for the creaking heartbreak that one can begin to hear, broken-heartedness born of the fracturing covenant between the Jews and the land that had given them the warmest welcome the Jews had ever known.

Bari Weiss, in a column called **Being Jewish in an Unraveling America**, wrote about being surprised when a rabbi invited her to go to a shooting range. But then,

realizes Weiss, she should probably not have been so shocked by the invitation.

The attack in Texas, the reaction to it ... **augurs a darkening reality for the six million Jews living in what the Founders insisted was a new Jerusalem.**

Jews thrived in an America that had confidence in its goodness. Jews are not safe—no one is—in one which does not. ... Five years ago, the rabbi's invitation to the gun range would have shocked me. Now I think: I'm glad I saved her number.

I doubt very much that the number of Jews living in the "New Jerusalem" to which Weiss refers (i.e. America) even approximates six million. But one can easily understand why she artfully chose that number. For in our collective memory, "six million" and "darkening reality" go hand in hand.

Sarah Wildman wrote in yesterday's *New York Times*, in **The Bat Mitzvah Question I Wasn't Expecting**, that one of her daughters asked her, "Are we safe at synagogue?"

Had I asked my parents that question half a century ago, they would have stared at me with disbelief at the absurdity of my doubt and would have responded, "Of course we are—this is America." I would have said the same thing to my own kids, back when we lived in Los Angeles, decades later. But that's not what Wildman told her daughter.

Instead, she said, “Our synagogue is well fortified.”

In the space of fifty years, two entirely different worlds. In the space of a couple of decades, at least on this score, the differences between Israel and the Diaspora have narrowed considerably.

Another moving response to Colleyville came from Deborah Lipstadt, still awaiting Senate confirmation as United States Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating anti-Semitism six months after President Biden nominated her. In her *New York Times* column, **For Jews, Going to Services Is an Act of Courage**, Lipstadt wrote:

We are shaken. We are not OK. But we will bounce back. We are resilient because we cannot afford not to be. That resiliency is part of the Jewish DNA. Without it, we would have disappeared centuries ago. We refuse to go away. But we are exhausted.

It’s an exhaustion that Bialik knew well, the exhaustion that gave rise to Zionism. It’s an exhaustion that European Jews with the metal detectors and soldiers outside their synagogues have known for years. And now, writes Lipstadt, it’s an exhaustion that’s come to America.

Were Bialik to paraphrase Professor Lipstadt, however, here’s what he would have said, putting her words in a different order, and changing a few slightly:

“We are shaken. We are not OK. We are exhausted, so we *must* go away.”

Bialik may or may not have been right, but that is what he would have said. What has bubbled to the surface in recent weeks is a simple truth that has always been front and center in Zionism’s worldview:

There has never been a Diaspora community that simply faded away. There was never a smooth landing, with the plane coasting gently to the end of the runway.

That was not how Babylonia ended. Or Spain. Or Poland. Or Germany. Or Italy. Or Greece. Or the rest of Europe. Or North Africa. Or anywhere.

What is unfolding now, the Zionist revolutionaries of old would have said, was simply a matter of time. The notion of two Jewish centers, one constantly facing danger and the other not, is a dying notion. Yet there are still differences: the two communities face different sorts of fear, and each fear shapes a distinct way of life.

Each of us has to choose the fear with which we wish to live.

One more thought about Dayan’s eulogy for Roi Rotberg. If we were going to edit Dayan’s speech, there’s one phrase we might change—for what we’re witness to is not so much “the fate of our generation.”

It's the fate of our people, wherever we might choose to live.