

Featured Post

The right to alternative narratives, even unpopular ones

On the storming of a Ra'anana synagogue: Israel must be willing and able to give people space to challenge accepted paradigms

Alon Tal May 6, 2025



Police escort a woman away from right-wing rioters who disrupted a screening at Ra'anana's Beit Samueli synagogue of the joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day ceremony, April 29, 2025. (X)

For anyone with even a teaspoon of historical consciousness, the images last week of violent [right-wing rioters attacking](#) a synagogue and forcing the evacuation of Beit Samueli, the Reform Ra'anana congregation, elicit dark memories of the past. Inside the holy confines of an Israeli synagogue, on the eve of Memorial Day — arguably the most sacred day on the national calendar — Jews were not safe. The epidemic of hatred, which has seized Israel under the present government, literally shattered the windows.

The synagogue and the 80 people inside were targeted over the broadcast of a legal, long-standing, “alternative” memorial ceremony run by bereaved Israeli and Palestinian parents. It was not a random mob. The extremists were led by the head of the Likud’s local Ra’anana branch, Rachel Ben Ari Skaat, who boasted to the press: “This is just the opening shot.”

The mob claimed to be motivated by patriotism. If so, it is a particularly vile variety. It is ironic that these “patriots” found it more important to devote their hearts and minds on Memorial Day to confronting peace advocates than to honoring the memory of thousands of soldiers who have died for the country. If the goal had been merely to protest, then the incident would be only a reflection of their warped priorities. It would not constitute a crime or a threat to democracy. But they chose to break the law.

Vandalizing a synagogue, hurling firecrackers, and forcing the closure of the ceremony was not enough. The fleeing participants were then hunted down and physically attacked. Orly Erez-Likhovski, a human rights attorney and Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center, ended up in the emergency room after she and her car were pelted with stones.

On the one hand, the issue is no more complicated than any debate over freedom of expression in a democratic society. Any response needs to start with zero tolerance of violence and criminal prosecution against the thugs. As National Unity party chair Benny Gantz said this week in the Knesset: “There is absolutely no room for this sort of violence anywhere — especially not in a synagogue.”

But to me, the implications of last week’s mob attack are more sinister.

Societal progress takes time. It often starts when brave individuals see reality differently from the majority and have the temerity to share their alternative narrative. The new perspective diverges from society’s prevailing paradigms and generally purports to deliver a better outcome. Slowly but surely, the alternative outlook gains support until it becomes dominant. Israeli history and our country’s moral evolution are replete with such transitions.

A majority of Israelis once held malevolent views about the legitimacy of homosexuality and the status of homosexuals. A small group of intrepid gay citizens suggested that there was another way of looking at sexuality. Over the years, the country came around to a new, healthier narrative about sexual preference.

In the case of the Alternative Memorial Day Service, it's hard not to admire people on both sides of the conflict — Israelis and Palestinians — who have lost those who are dearest to them, and are still able to come together. They have found a way to get past their pain, anger, and impulse toward vengeance. Their call to live in harmony resonates as almost utopian.

If we can even detach for a minute from present exigencies and the heartache of October 7th and its aftermath, one thing should be clear: in the long run, if we are ever going to spare our children and grandchildren from a crushing destiny of forever “living by the sword,” this is a narrative that both sides eventually are going to have to embrace.

The problem for many of us, of course, is the timing. I believe that there exists a personal and collective need to mourn the tens of thousands of dedicated citizens, mostly young, who sacrificed their lives so that we might have the privilege of living in the State of Israel. For one day in the year, we should fully focus on our loss and fully embrace our solemn obligation to remember their sacrifice, without being confused by other aspirational agendas.

Others see it differently. Surely, those Israelis and Palestinians who hold a ceremony on Memorial Day that promotes their more conciliatory narrative, along with those around the country who identify and want to watch, are entitled to do so without fear of being assaulted.

I understand that the Israeli police were caught by surprise, notwithstanding the massive social media buildup. I understand that on such a busy evening, only five officers could be assigned to the synagogue when police had to ensure the safety of numerous public ceremonies. But everything that happened was filmed. This was a premeditated attack that was well-

organized and well-documented. We know who did it. Where are the arrests? Where are the indictments?

I am not really surprised by the lack of a swift response from the Israeli police. After all, for some time, we have watched the complacency of Israeli cops in the face of intermittent violence against the local Arab population by a group of extremist Jews on the West Bank. The police are overseen by a racist minister of national security. This is the same Itamar Ben Gvir who once yelled at me during a Knesset speech that my praying as a Conservative Jew at the Western Wall was a greater provocation than Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount.

I also have little expectation from a Likud party that long ago abandoned decency, dignity, and a commitment to the rule of law that Herut founders, Jabotinsky and Begin personified. The only thing that informed the party's local party head was hatred and intolerance. Did anyone really believe that the Likud Chair, Prime Minister Netanyahu, who for some time has been a hostage to his increasingly extreme "base," would condemn such lawlessness?

But I am very disappointed with the response of other political leaders. Take Ra'anana mayor, Haim Broide, who heads one of Israel's most liberal cities. Broide released a pitiful Facebook post after the attack. He spends much of it defending his decision not to ban the screening of the alternative ceremony, because he regrettably lacked the legal authority to do so. "Already last week, I was checking how to prevent provocative events in Ra'anana to preserve unity and public order." Such a position constitutes an ideological justification for the hoodlums' violence and an implicit disregard for freedom of expression for unpopular views.

Under these challenging circumstances, how should we respond to the Ra'anana pogrom? To begin with, the police need to be forced to do their job. Initially, three of the rioters were arrested. The last time I checked, they had been released, and nothing had been done to expedite their indictment. Once again, we are reminded of how important an independent judiciary is. Legal

action can force the police to make arrests and prosecute. Here, I trust that Israel's civil society knows what must be done to force the police to enforce the law.

And we still live in a democracy. We still have the ballot box. Ra'anana's mayor has a very shaky majority in the city council. After such a moral failure, citizens in this progressive city need to demand that their representatives on the City Council seize control from a politician who has so little regard, not only for his city's Reform Jewish community, but for anyone who dares to depart from national narratives and consensus.

Most of all, we need to send this government and its right-wing, intolerant, incompetent members packing. Israel is a much better place than that small corner of Ra'anana where Jews were brazenly attacked last Tuesday evening. Israelis are much better than a vicious mob, committed to using force to shut down and injure people with whom they disagree.

Elections are on the way... sooner or later. Let's ensure that Israel remains a country that not only tolerates alternative narratives but even gives them space to make their case.

About the Author

Alon Tal is a professor of Public Policy at Tel Aviv University. In 2021 and 2022, he was chair of the Knesset's Environment, Climate & Health subcommittee.