From Kfar Aza to the world: A powerful portrait of Israel's solitude

written by Arsen Ostrovsky | 19.09.2024

"I will never forget my first impressions: the smell of sour milk that filled the bullet-pocked, blasted, half-burned houses; the contents of their kitchen cabinets scattered in the rooms, as if blown away by a hurricane."

And so begins the haunting first chapter of 'Israel Alone', the latest book just released by world renowned French philosopher, writer and activist, Bernard-Henri Lévy, or BHL is he is most commonly known, describing in searing emotion his first reaction of being in Kfar Aza in southern Israel, the day after the October 7th massacre by Hamas.

The book, a 'cri de coeur', that quintessentially French phrase that translates to 'a cry from the heart', weaves from Lévy shock and pain at what he saw from the graves of southern Israel, to how 11 months later, the Jewish state today stands alone, "decidedly, dramatically alone."

However, I cannot help but keep returning to his reference about the "sour milk". At the same time as Lévy was in Kfar Aza, I was nearby in Kibbutz Be'eri, another valley of insurmountable death and destruction, in the immediate days after the Hamas pogrom.

When you stand in a place like this, your body might freeze, but your senses are immediately heightened. For me, it was the unmistakable stench of death, the gun residue and the food still left out, from the Shabbat dinners the night before October 7th.

Levi's account resonates on a profoundly personal level

Shaken to the core at the images that were unfolding on that infamous 'Black Sabbath' morning, Lévy flew to Israel the very next day, in order to bear witness

and give voice to the voiceless.

As Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Weisel once said, “for the dead and the living, we must bear witness. For not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories.” And the modern-Jewish state has had no greater ‘witness’, no greater champion, than Lévy, who had dedicated his life to the defending the justness and “the greatness of Israel.”

While in Be’eri, Sderot, Kfar Aza and the site of the Nova music festival massacre, Levy met with survivors, soldiers, first responders and families in agonizing pain, not knowing about the fate of their loved ones, who had just been taken hostage into Gaza.

After opening his book with an emotional punch to the gut about the indescribable horror he witnessed in southern Israel, Lévy proceeds to make the despondent, yet utterly convincing case how, notwithstanding the worst massacre to befall the Jewish people since the Holocaust, the Jewish state stands desperately alone today, in a battle between good and evil.

For Lévy, on October 7th, “more than the Israeli or Jewish soul was murdered here; it was our common conscience”. Today the role of victim and oppressor has been inverted, while basic principles of justice abandoned. And as the State of Israel has been perversely singled out as some kind of international pariah, the monstrosity of Hamas’ crimes and ongoing captivity of hostages has somehow been relegated to barely an afterthought, or unconscionably worse, their barbarism, rape and cruelty justified. Lévy makes the case how this represents not only the abandonment of the world’s sole Jewish state, but an abandonment of the collective moral conscience of the West.

Jews are alone

Though the book is titled ‘Israel Alone’, in some respects, it may as well be titled ‘The Jews Alone’. Simply put, with the exception of some heroic voices, we have been abandoned. Abandoned by world leaders, abandoned by self-righteous politicians, abandoned by civil society and abandoned by all those with whom the Jews stood with, defended and fought for.

Reflecting on this unabated unleashing of Jew-hate and abandonment after

October 7th, and even downright support for Hamas in the West, Lévy comes to the painful, reluctant, yet tragically accurate realization that, “no land on this planet is a shelter for Jews.” Invoking ‘Amalek’, the Jewish people’s evil precursor to Hitler and Sinwar, Lévy declares “he has come out of limbo to bang on our doors and drum in our ears.”

In short, as Lévy concludes “Yes, the Jews are more alone than they have ever been”, however, he adds an important caveat, that “tragedy is Greek, not Jewish”.

Despite taking his readers on a journey of utter despair, agony and questioning the Jews place in the world, Lévy ends with an inspiring affirmation in our faith, our history and the indispensable centrality of Zionism and Israel to our future.

Lévy understands that the Jewish people are not defined solely by heartache, loss and the pain that history’s ‘Amaleks’ seek to inflict upon us, but that our collective story is also one of unyielding hope, courage, liberation, and resilience.

Indeed, “the soul, mind, and genius of Judaism are standing firm amid tumult and torment” says Lévy, in his concluding words.

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