

The Israeli Government and Global Antisemitism

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Hannah Szenes is best known as a poet, but perhaps she would have wanted to be remembered more as a paratrooper. After immigrating to Palestine from Hungary in 1939, Szenes joined the British Army's Jewish Brigade in 1943. She accepted a perilous mission: parachuting into Central Europe, crossing into Hungary, intending to rescue Jews in her native land from the hands of the Nazis. Tragically, before she could reach those she hoped to save, Szenes was apprehended and executed. Her remains and those of her compatriots in that endeavor were later moved to a place of honor at Israel's national cemetery on Mount Herzl.ⁱ

The Haganah, the Jewish defense force in Palestine that would later become the Israel Defense Force, fought **against** the British in Palestine, resisting a colonial power that prohibited Jews from escaping the Holocaust by immigrating to Palestine, but also fought **alongside** the British to defeat the Nazis in Europe. Even before Israel became a state, leaders of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in Palestine, took up arms and advocated clearly to protect the Jewish people from antisemitism worldwide.

In 1948, the new Jewish State immediately devoted itself to the needs of endangered Jews, whoever or wherever they might be. Israel rapidly welcomed hundreds of thousands of displaced persons who had survived the Nazi Holocaust. Soon, though, attention turned to Jews facing antisemitism in lands where they had lived relatively safely for hundreds of years, as most Muslim-majority nations now persecuted their Jewish minorities when they could not dislodge the Jewish State. Some 650,000 found new homes in Israel.

Israel would later join the United States, allies, and Jewish communities worldwide in advocacy for repressed Soviet Jews. Israel advocated for their rights within the Soviet Union and their freedom to immigrate for Israel, ultimately absorbing 1.1 million immigrants over a forty-year period. Over fifteen percent of these immigrants were non-Jewish relatives of Jews,ⁱⁱ escaping antisemitism with their families, and Israel welcomed this mixed multitude. Israel also responded to antisemitism and deprivation facing Ethiopia's Jews, bringing some one hundred sixty thousand to the Jewish State beginning in the late 1970s.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sadly, though, the current government of Israel has retreated from much of the country's mission of responding to antisemitism worldwide. To be sure, when antisemitism is intertwined with anti-Israel advocacy, as it too often is, the

government is rightly quick to confront that forcefully. However, when antisemitic authoritarian governments that support Israel falsely rewrite their nations' Holocaust histories and embitter the lives of Jews in their own countries, the Netanyahu government is nowhere to be found. The most notorious example is Hannah Szenes's native Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orban

William Echikson, editor of the Holocaust Remembrance Project, explains: "In [Hungary's] 2017 parliamentary election, Orbán promoted anti-Semitic imagery of powerful Jewish financiers scheming to control the world." Moreover, Echikson writes that the Orbán regime "has inflated Hungary's role in 'saving' the Jews of Budapest and minimized discourse on their own complicity in deporting and killing Jews. State-appointed 'historians' have relativized the horrors of the Holocaust, and often depict their own people as victims of what they say was Jewish-supported communism."^{iv}

Hungary's Holocaust denial is beneath contempt. "After Orbán came to power in 2010, he appointed András Levente Gál to direct the Holocaust Memorial and Documentation Center in Budapest. According to Paul Shapiro of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Gal's first proposal was to eliminate mention of [wartime Hungarian leader] Miklós Horthy's alliance with Adolf Hitler...Gal's second proposal... 'was to sanitize the record of Hungarian participation in the ghettoization and deportation of the country's Jews and place full blame for the destruction of Hungarian Jewry on Germany.' Even though the resulting international outcry led to Gál's dismissal, Orbán's government went ahead anyhow and built a 'Memorial to the Victims of German Occupation' with the same message."^v

"Unfortunately," Echikson concludes, "[Prime Minister] Netanyahu overlooks his friend Orbán's peccadillos because of the Hungarian leader's strong support for his hard-line policy toward the Palestinians."^{vi}

Orban is not the only far-right European antisemite to be embraced by the Israeli government. In a move best termed Orwellian, Israel's Minister of Diaspora Affairs Amichai Chikli, invited some of Europe's most notorious antisemites to an international conference on antisemitism. Can you imagine the ADL boycotting a global convention to confront antisemitism? Well, that's what happened in March, when Chikli refused to disinvite European antisemites. As a *Haaretz* editorial explained, "All this left the conference with representatives of far-right and populist parties" *Haaretz* concludes: "Not only is Israel not protecting the world's Jews from antisemitism, it encourages it by officially favoring its relations with the far right over its relations with the Diaspora."^{vii}

Thankfully, the Israeli government is not the only entity charged with combating antisemitism and seeing to the wellbeing of Jews worldwide. The Jewish Agency for Israel takes that role seriously. Most American Jews have never heard of the Jewish Agency—in Hebrew, the *Sochnut*—but we have seen its work. For example, the program that sends Israeli counselors to Jacobs Camp each summer comes through the *Sochnut*, as does a host of programming and initiatives linking Jews around the world with one another and with Israel.

The *Sochnut* is governed by the World Zionist Congress, a body elected by Jews worldwide, including many of us here at Congregation B’nai Israel who have already cast our votes.

Amid the myriad reasons to pay the five-dollar administrative fee and vote Reform, not least is that we need to assure that the Jewish Agency can continue to serve and include the entire Jewish community—including Jews whose mothers were not themselves born to Jewish mothers and everybody who ever converted to Judaism under Reform or Conservative auspices. Of the five young people from our congregation who are graduating from high school this year, only one would qualify as a Jew by the standards of our opponents. As things stand now, if any of them should ever, God forbid, face antisemitism at a level that requires their moving to Israel, the Jewish Agency would be there to facilitate immigration. Our far right and ultra-Orthodox opponents in this critical election want to put an end to that. Still another reason to vote Reform is to assure that the *Sochnut* will continue to combat antisemitism worldwide, whatever the source—the anti-Israel extreme left or the supposedly pro-Israel extreme right.

Since October 7, 2023, Jews worldwide have turned to an anthem, *Acheinu*, articulating the plight of our brothers and sisters held in cruel captivity in the tunnels of Gaza. The song, though, is much older, first found in a twelfth century compilation in France,^{viii} affirming our kinship and crying out for the liberation of **all** who face persecution and deprivation for no reason except that they are Jews.

Let us, let the State of Israel, and let the Jewish people everywhere, turn toward *acheinu v’achiyoteinu*—literally, our brothers and sisters—whoever and wherever they may be, whatever the source of their affliction.

Amen.

ⁱ [Hannah Szenes: Zionist, Paratrooper and Poet | Yad Vashem](#).

ⁱⁱ Mark Tolts, “A Half Century of Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union: Demographic Aspects, p. 17, [Tolts M. A Half Century of Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union - Harvard4 0.pdf](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Penny Schwartz, “Fighting on Behalf of Ethiopian Jews,” January 19, 2023, [Fighting on Behalf of Ethiopian Jews | january | 2023 | The Jewish Experience | Brandeis University](#).

^{iv} William Echikson, “Victor Orban’s anti-Semitism problem,” *Politico*, May 13, 2019, [Viktor Orbán’s anti-Semitism problem – POLITICO](#).

^v Echikson.

^{vi} Echikson

^{vii} “How Antisemites Got Invited to an Antisemitism Conference,” *Haaretz* lead editorial, March 27, 2025, [How Antisemites Got Invited to an Antisemitism Conference - Haaretz Editorial - Haaretz.com](#).

^{viii} Louis Keene, “Israeli soldiers are singing it in Gaza, and American Jews in shul: A Jewish song takes flight in crisis,” *The Forward*, January 16, 2024.