The Wisdom of Ivy

By Ami Weintraub
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In the graveyard in Berlin, vines of ivy weave together, covering the ground.

"The Nazis used this Jewish graveyard to bury their officers," the tour guide from Germany Close Up explains. I become aware that under my feet, the bones of Jews mix with the bones of their oppressors.

"No one knew what to do with this after the war. So they let the ivy take over."

I watch the roots of the green leaves sink deep into the dirt. I imagine their twisting edges grasping the bodies buried side by side. There is a peace in this unlikely place. The roots metabolize the pain of these unholy deaths, returning hate filled, fear filled flesh back to the earth.

I clutch my chest and feel a tightness constricting my lungs. I have not yet learned how to make peace with the bones of my ancestors and the bones of our oppressors. I pray that the ivy and the earth show me how.

Violence creates a cruel intimacy between perpetrator and victim. Rather than remaining passing people, a moment of brutality entwines strangers' histories and futures forever. Like bones forever mixing in a graveyard - we are left to figure out how to disentangle from those who hated us. How to free ourselves from this pain.

A Rabbi of mine laughed with me this summer. "There are two types of Jews," he declared. "Those who know they are crazy because of the Holocaust, and those who are crazy and don't know it's from the Holocaust."

I smile at this joke as the sunshine fills the small sanctuary where we have been praying every morning for a week. We laugh to soften the weight of truth. In reality, his words outline the anxiety that fills my father's night terrors of being drafted into the 1900s Russian army. They color the stories of anger and yelling that filled the house of the Partisan Fighter's grandchildren. They explain the eating disorder my ex had. She told me once, "I sometimes try to imagine if I could eat and survive on what my grandmother ate when she was hiding for years during the Holocaust."

How do we get free from this? I ask the summer sun, the trees, the wide open lake in Connecticut. I feel the spirits of the Nazis reaching through their resting places, pulling at the edges of my body. We walk in fear of ghosts who may one day turn real again.

This past December, Selmar texts me. "Do you still want to be in touch?"

We met my first time in Berlin with Germany Close Up. We had similar politics, we liked the same music, we shared friends. After the program, I spent a night on his roof watching the sunset. Quickly, sunsets became our ritual. While I was in Berlin, we'd find each other at this moment of transition. Later, I would text him photos of beautiful sunsets that I saw and he'd do the same. The perpetuity of sky at twilight held us together.

We were fascinated with each other because we were so alike. But also, because he was German. I was Jewish. He lived in the lands of his ancestors while I lived far away from the Eastern European homes my family had inhabited for generations.

"Are you in pain too?" I asked him curiously, at one of the first sunsets we shared together. I wanted to know I wasn't alone in the way this history wreaked havoc on my mind and

body. If we were fated to be in an eternal dance of victim and perpetrator, it would only be fair if we all felt the pain equally.

"Yes," he said slowly. "But it's different."

Weeks later we sat at a lake in rural Germany. I watched children playing and chatting in German as the summer sun dappled the leaves and made the water sparkle. I touched my cheeks and realized they were wet. I was crying.

"Germans have pain from what happened," I said slowly. "But you still have the land, the language, and the customs to help you heal."

Selmar nodded his head as I finally realized the difference in our pain. This difference was one that he had known for much longer. I had tried desperately to find so much congruence between us but -

there are no lands that help hold my pain.

When Selmar texts me in December it is after months and months of unending war in Israel / Palestine.

"Do you still want to be in touch?"

I read it over again as I lie under my blankets on this overcast, Winter afternoon.

I feel new ghosts reaching towards me, filling me with anger and fear.

I hadn't been able to get myself to talk to him in months. It felt unfair again. Hearing about his trips to beautiful Italian mountains and Austrian forests.

The lands are holding you, I kept thinking as I watched the lands of Israel and Gaza destroy Palestinians and Israelis who I loved. Homes decimated, families lost, streets turned into

sites of protest, into funeral processions. Images of bomb blasted, soot colored earth. And dirt that seemed to always, always be running red with blood.

Where were the lands that could hold me?

But I looked out my window and saw the sun beginning to set. Each night a different array of oranges, pinks and reds streamed in through the window of my Brooklyn apartment. I remembered the sunsets I shared with Selmar. The sunsets that my ancestors gathered during for their Maariv prayers. Nightfall marks a new day in Judaism. We trust that something different can indeed come from the darkness.

I feel the silence hanging between us as I wait to reply. I remember what Selmar taught me early on - silence often takes the place of processing pain for Germans. As Jews, we instead laugh, joke, yell and scream. We have no choice but to find a way to let the suffering out.

Selmar's discussion of hikes and trips was his way of staying connected even when he didn't know how to talk about the weight of all that was happening around us. For me, these casual conversations made me feel like I needed to carry the pain alone.

The first star began to twinkle in the coming night sky.

"Yes, I'd like to be in touch." I hit send. "But we need to talk about what's happening right now. The legacy of the Holocaust is embroiling me in violent global politics. I feel very used as a Jewish person, and I look and see that Germans still get to be more free, more in control of their narrative."

Two more stars splash across the sky, marking a new Jewish day.

"While it didn't cross my mind before - now I am realizing it should have. It makes sense to me that this is weighing on our relationship."

I breathe deeply as his words flash across my phone. We could share the weight of this pain again.

I write this essay as I check update after update on the long awaited ceasefire and hostage release set for today.

I see the faces of Gazans bright with joy for the first time in so long. I read their words of hope for homes that are still standing, family members who are still living. And it is tinged, of course, with an all consuming pain and devastation.

What is left of the lands that hold them?

At night I have dreamt of a ceasefire, of a lasting peace, of a return of prisoners and hostages and a healing of all wounded bodies. And in the day, I return to the darkness of reality. For so many months I have watched in horror as IDF soldiers hold guns in their hands. Coursing through many of these young mens' bodies is the fear their ancestors felt as they faced Nazi soldiers not so long ago.

But in front of their gun is a scared civilian, a much needed hospital, a school where children once learned.

Look what you've done! I want to yell.

But who do I yell at?

At the IDF soldiers?

At Hamas?

At the Nazis?

At the politics that make us believe killing one another makes us more safe.

I feel my own fear as I write this. I fear this honesty will make me lose the competition for a free trip to Germany. I feel myself still trying to make myself the, “Good Jew,” so Germans will allow me back into their lands.

Silence has become the polite way to navigate violence.

But the silence is choking me, it’s killing us. I am desperate to escape its reach.

I don’t want silence to take the place of grieving.

I watch the first three hostages come home and I cry. I learn for the first time that one of these hostages is the cousin of my close family friend. I try to study their faces to see if they can tell us what they have suffered.

Why have they had to suffer so?

“Matir asurim / Free the captives.”

For 2,000 years we have recited this plea three times a day in our Amidah prayers. In each generation it rings out with a different meaning.

For the first time in so long, our prayer is answered.

“Matir asurim,” I whisper loudly so my own bones tremble with the possibility of true freedom.

On this day of ceasefire and hostage release, I remember the graveyard in Berlin. In a year of so much destruction, I dream of vines that can stitch the wounded parts back together. I imagine myself sitting next to the ivy, watching as the roots deftly hold the bones of so many people. Nazis, Jews - held by the land. Returned to the soil.

“From dust, to dust,” we read in our sacred books. It is the promise of death.

But still, the ghosts reach out from beyond the graves. My ancestors call to me, asking me to help them heal. The Nazis cry at my feet asking for forgiveness. There is no silence between us anymore.

In Brooklyn, I notice the setting sun. I know that this new, Jewish day brings the inauguration of a president whose regime instills deep fear in my heart. His words animated the rise in anti-semitism that led to a shooter killing 11 people at my synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Now, there is so much silence around what is to come.

A week ago, Selmar texted me, “I don’t know what exactly made me think of you earlier, but I did and it made me smile.”

I smile back, feeling the warmth of an old friend. He asks if I am planning on returning to Berlin and I laugh at the way this fraught land always pulls me back.

The site of pain becomes sacred and I yearn to return to the wisdom embedded in a land that once hurt me. I return again and again asking the trees and the ivy to teach me how to hold so much during these dark days.

Whispered in Dachau, Belted in Oberammergau

Julie Levey

Dachau, 2022

Hineni. That was the first word I spoke to myself as I stood in the former gas chamber at Dachau in the summer of 2022. *Hineni*: Here I am.

The morning I landed in Munich for Germany Close Up, I traveled to Dachau with a dozen young Jews representing the American Jewish Committee (AJC). There, we walked down a wide path between two symmetrical lines of trees surrounded by gravel rectangles where barracks once stood. When we reached the Jewish memorial, we sang *Adonai Ro'i* (Psalm 23) and chanted the memorial prayer *El Malei Rachamim*. A crowd gathered; onlookers took pictures of us. "People don't usually pray here," our tour guide explained. I felt uneasy that others saw our remembrance as a spectacle, a curiosity.

As we prayed, I started to cry. My tears did not cease as we walked the short distance to Dachau's gas chamber. I thought that I would be able to create distance between myself and the history that had occurred there. But I was not numb, and it felt real. For the first time in my life, I was standing in a gas chamber; I was standing in the spot where so many had been murdered. "*Hineni*," I whispered to myself, breathing in reality and choking back tears. "Here I am."

The next words I whispered to myself: "*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*." Standing in a place so closely associated with destruction, these were the words that came to me. These words that I recite every night before I sleep, these central words to Judaism, felt different in Dachau. They were my assertion that I was standing there, Jewish, and not hanging on to my very last breath. They were my way—my all too confident way—of saying "We are still here."

I walked out of Dachau in the summer of 2022. It was not lost on me that I was Jewish and I got to leave, but I also—blissfully, ignorantly—believed that I was living in a world so different from the one I had just seen a relic of.

Re'im, 2024

It was not until the summer of 2024, when I visited the site of the October 7, 2023, Nova music festival massacre, that I realized how naïve I had been when I left Dachau. The desert strip in Re'im reminded me of the concentration camp, for there is a distinct type of hideous feeling that can only be brought about by evidence that people want my people decimated. Witnessing the parallels between the two sites helped crystallize the magnitude and horror of what had occurred on October 7; witnessing invigorated my anger and activism.

Despite the parallels, Dachau and the Nova festival site were not the same. In Re'im, there had been no time to manicure trees; to establish an official tour guide program; to construct monuments and through doing so, move the tragedy into the category of history. The site was raw. Its memorials were makeshift, the wounds of its survivors and visitors had barely begun to heal. I prayed the *Mincha* service and could hardly hear the words of the *Shema* leave my own lips over the resonant thunder of cannon fire mere kilometers away.

Oberammergau, 2022

Two days after Dachau, we traveled to Oberammergau, a small Bavarian village with a big reputation. About once a decade since 1634, Oberammergau has performed a Passion Play, a spectacle telling the story of the last days of Jesus' life. Today, Oberammergau's Passion Play is globally famous and people make pilgrimages from around the world to see it.

The Passion Play was infamous for being very antisemitic, portraying Jews as responsible for killing Jesus. With the help of leaders from American Jewish advocacy organizations including AJC, the production has gradually become less and less antisemitic. The 2022 Passion Play was the first to be nearly void of antisemitism. For his tremendous work on revising the Passion Play hand in hand with Jewish leaders, AJC chose to honor director Christian Stückl.

After our group presented Stückl with an award, we celebrated. I sat at a long wooden table singing traditional German songs with lederhosen-sporting young men who'd grown out their blonde locks and beards to portray Jesus and his disciples. When they ran out of tunes, I reciprocated by teaching them "*Gesher Tzar Me'od*," one of my favorite Hebrew songs. Jesus, Peter, Judas, Matthew, James, and the like sang: *"Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, veha'ikar lo lefached klal."* (The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge. And the main thing to recall is to have no fear at all.)

I contemplated these words as we sang them. Less than a century earlier, many of Oberammergau's residents had been members of the Nazi party. Hitler had visited for the 1930 and 1934 productions of the Passion Play. Just days before, I had stood inside a former gas chamber, and the day after, while exploring Munich, I had laid eyes on the spot where Kristallnacht began.

As the words to "*Gesher Tzar Me'od*" instructed, I tried not to fear. Yes, there were little things. Boarding a train in a German station conjured images I had studied in school of Jewish people being crowded into cars for one-way trips. A tarp displaying old, single shoes at a flea market brought to mind the piles of shoes taken from concentration camp prisoners. These things caused me moments of anxiety, moments in which I had to pause and remind myself that it wasn't 1940. Yet, I was a Jew sitting across from Germans playing Jesus and his apostles in a teeny Bavarian

village's Passion Play. I was teaching them a Jewish song, and they were loving it. We were creating—we were being—the *gesher*, the bridge. It was 2022, and it was a different world.

Princeton, 2023

In the days and weeks following October 7, the image of singing around the table in Oberammergau came to mind again and again. Following Hamas' brutal attack on Israel, there was a brief period of quiet on Princeton University's campus. Internally, our Jewish community was mourning. Externally, life on campus seemed normal, unchanged. It was disorienting to feel like I was living in an altered world while most everything around me remained the same, but as the president of the University's Center for Jewish Life (Hillel), I was, for a short time, able to focus only on what our Jewish community needed in our grief. That changed all too quickly.

At Princeton and around the world, many in my generation decided that Israel is a settler colonial state, that Hamas' attack on October 7 was heroic, and that Zionists are white supremacists or even Nazis. On my walks to Kabbalat Shabbat services, I passed students shouting chants that denied Israel's right to exist. I tried to focus my leadership on fostering Jewish community and pride, but it was all too easy to be distracted by anxiety and anger.

What was this new reality, this complete reversal of what I used to believe? A year and a half earlier, I had sat around a table singing in German and Hebrew with young men my age, many of whom were presumably the descendants of Nazis. Now, some of my contemporaries—in fact, some people I had considered good friends—saw me as promoting terrorism and genocide. Attempts at building a *gesher* seemed futile.

Oberammergau, 2022

The most significant improvement Stückl made to the Passion Play was emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus and his apostles. Although historically inaccurate, they wore head coverings resembling *kippot*; they recited *Kiddush* and *Hamotzi*. And, most strikingly, in the middle of the first of the two-and-a-half-hour halves of the play, they sang an original composition of the same words I had recited in Dachau: the *Shema*. The actors pronounced the Hebrew perfectly. If I had closed my eyes I could have been at a Yom Kippur service instead of a Christian pilgrimage site. Yet, it was disorienting hearing the prayer sung so loudly and intensely in a Passion Play, in a context that felt very far from Judaism as I knew it.

The words of the *Shema*—they were whispered in Dachau; belted in Oberammergau. They were muttered by a Jewish American processing a devastating history of her people and they were shouted by Bavarian actors reckoning with performing a play that has historically perpetuated antisemitism in the country where the Holocaust began.

Berlin, 2022

We left Oberammergau the morning after the play and traveled to Berlin, arriving in time for Shabbat. That evening, I went to *Kabbalat Shabbat* services at the *Neue Synagoge* on *Oranienburger Straße* in Berlin. The synagogue, which had been Germany's most prestigious in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was mostly destroyed during World War II. We prayed behind the building in a vacant gravel courtyard where the sanctuary used to stand. Almost note for note, the community sang *Kabbalat Shabbat* using the same melodies I knew. The rabbi and I exchanged glances as we prayed; we silently acknowledged Jewish global connectivity.

I did not know what the week's Torah portion was when I showed up again to services the following morning. But as a woman began to chant the sixth *aliyah* of *Parshat Va'etchanan*, I realized she was reading the *Shema* from its original place in the Torah. I looked around the courtyard, thinking about what it would have been like before the Holocaust. I focused my attention on the woman's chanting, which brought me back to the source. The source of my quiet prayer in Dachau and the source of the Passion Play's loud proclamation that there was no place for antisemitism anymore.

Hineni, I thought to myself. Here I am.

New York City, 2024

There I was. In 2022, this story felt complete. The words of the *Shema* had carried me around Germany, back and forth between memorialized destruction and new beginnings. I left the country with faith in the strength of my people and with gratitude that I was born into a world in which I could befriend Bavarian contemporaries telling the story of Jesus Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection.

Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel and the international explosion of anti-Zionist and antisemitic rhetoric and activity that followed have challenged my conception of Jewish safety in the 21st century. Born and raised in New York City, I no longer take it for granted that I am safe in the city with the second largest Jewish population outside of Tel Aviv.

Reflecting on my time in Germany has helped me identify the many aspects and patterns of our present reality that all-too-closely mirror the past. It has also, importantly, helped me understand the plethora of ways in which 2024 is not the mid-20th century.

Earlier this year, my family's synagogue in New York City was defaced with antisemitic graffiti. But unlike the *Neue Synagogue* sanctuary, it still stands. In the past months, I have, at times,

taken circuitous subway routes to steer clear of anti-Israel protests and consciously avoided wearing Hillel clothing outside my apartment. But I am still free to walk in my city's Israel parade and to recognize the first anniversary of Hamas' October 7 massacre in the middle of a city landmark.

It seems somewhat futile to speculate about what the Jewish future will look like—after all, the perspective I held walking out of Dachau so radically shifted over the course of mere months. But it is my hope to return to Oberammergau for a future Passion Play. I want to breathe the mountain air; I want to get lost once again in a town too small to justify forgetting where I started. But most of all, I want to hear the words of the *Shema* echo through the massive amphitheater, and I want to feel—to know—that I am there, that we are still here.

Todd Silberglied

Few American Jews have stood arm-in-arm with a descendant of a top Nazi official in the crematorium of a concentration camp, but there I was in the summer of 2023. I was on a trip to Berlin with nine other American Jews, ready to learn more about the Holocaust, Germany's post-war recovery, and the current challenges the country faces both domestically and on the world stage. We were joined by ten other participants—German non-Jews who had traveled from Frankfurt, Munich, and other parts of Germany to join us.

The ten-day trip featured one day more powerful than the rest, about halfway through the program. That Wednesday morning, we toured the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, followed by the museum located just beneath it. Later, we boarded a bus to Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp in Oranienburg, Germany, used primarily as a labor camp for political prisoners, a training facility for SS officers, and, toward the end of the war, a testing ground for large-scale gas chambers in Poland.

We began a guided tour with a knowledgeable Jewish rabbinical student, born and raised in Germany, with one German and one American parent. She left us at the final stop of the tour, the designated "Station Z," which included four crematoria and a gas chamber added after 1943. It was there that our group shared a profoundly moving moment. Our staff distributed candles to light in honor of the victims of Sachsenhausen and all who perished in the Holocaust.

The plan was to light the candles, say a few words in remembrance, and have the Jewish participants recite the Mourner's Kaddish, a prayer recited by Jews in mourning. But we quickly encountered a challenge. Even though the crematorium was mostly enclosed, the wind seeped through, causing our candles to blow out moments after ignition. Some of us tried lighting our candles multiple times or shielding the flame with our hands, but few succeeded for long. Ultimately, we recited the blessing, even though most of our candles were extinguished.

Afterward, we had thirty minutes to explore the concentration camp on our own, and the group began to disperse. I stayed back for a moment. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a member of our staff break down in tears, experiencing an emotional reaction unlike anything I had seen before. But how could this be? Not only was this staff member American and not Jewish, but he had staffed about a dozen of these trips before, making him no stranger to visiting concentration camps.

I took a step toward him, intending to offer comfort, when I suddenly started crying myself. I had not cried until that moment—not at the Holocaust Memorial or museum, not at the camp, and not even during the Mourner's Kaddish at the crematorium. So why

now? Instead of approaching him, I turned in the opposite direction, finding a corner of the crematorium where I could cry unseen.

Several thoughts raced through my mind. First was my disbelief in his sense of empathy. I later learned why his reaction was so visceral: he described feeling a hyper-focus on the candle, a need to keep the flame alive as an act of solidarity with his Jewish friends. He did not know the prayer. He had no family affected by the Holocaust. In his mind, keeping the flame alive was the least he could do. When the wind extinguished the flame, he felt he had failed us, even though it was not his fault.

The other feeling that overwhelmed me was imposter syndrome. I had walked into the crematorium of a concentration camp with a yarmulke on my head, recited Hebrew out loud, and was able to walk right back out, unscathed. Who was I to be lucky enough to return to a nice hotel, text my friends and family, and eat a warm dinner?

By this point, I was really crying. But I did not fight the tears. I let myself feel everything.

After five or ten minutes, I finally calmed down and turned to see two of the German participants crying as well. They came over, and I hugged them both. We stood there, my arm around one of the girls, kippah still on my head, looking out at the sea of ovens—a German and a Jew, arm-in-arm in such a place of profound sorrow.

She asked me, “Did you come to this corner to face east?”—since Jews pray facing Jerusalem. I replied, “No, I came here because it was the closest place I could cry without anyone seeing me.” Out of curiosity, I pulled out my phone and opened the compass. I was, indeed, facing east.

Upon returning to Berlin, we spent time sharing our experiences and reflections from the day. For the first time, the girl I stood with earlier shared that her family had a troubling connection to the Nazi party. She explained why she had been crying when we saw each other in the crematorium: guilt.

She admitted that when she came over to me, she felt bad that I was the one comforting her. Should it have not been the other way around? After she said this, I stood up, walked over to her, and gave her a big hug. At that moment, I realized I was not just comforting her—we were comforting each other.

The next day, we held an impromptu roundtable to dive even deeper, sharing our families’ stories from the Nazi era. Many of the Jewish participants spoke about survival, but, for the first time, some of the Germans shared their families’ histories in the Nazi party. It was not surprising—military service was mandatory for most adult German men during World War II—but it did not make the stories any easier to hear.

I sat next to the girl I had shared that moment with at Sachsenhausen. Through tears, she shared the horrific things a family member of hers had done. I placed my hand on her shoulder to comfort her as she revealed this painful history.

Later, another German participant asked me how I could comfort her, considering what her ancestors had done to mine. I explained two things. First, I don't blame her or anyone else for their ancestors' actions. Second, it was almost easy to comfort her because she, along with the other Germans on the trip, had done something most Germans had not: they applied to join this program to learn about Judaism. They attended Shabbat services, followed along with the German translations in the Siddur, wore kippot, banged on the tables during Shalom Aleichem, and visited sites important to our Jewish history. They made an effort to learn our stories and culture.

That Shabbat evening, we encountered antisemitism firsthand. On our way to dinner, many of us kept our kippot on. A group of men rolled down their car windows, shouting at us in Arabic and flipping us off. We were not carrying Israeli flags. We were simply wearing kippot—and ironically, the Germans among us were not even Jewish.

That morning, I had asked my roommate if he knew the song Kol Ha'olam Kulo, a triumphant song about fearlessness. After our encounter, I said, "You know we have to sing it now, right?"

I will never forget that rooftop moment in Berlin, loudly singing, "The main thing is to have no fear at all!"

Upon returning home, I went to my grandmother's place to tell her about the trip. I also asked if she could tell me more about our own family history—escaping hardships and torment in Russia, Hungary, Poland, and other Eastern European countries. She agreed but told me I needed to talk to her neighbor first.

My grandmother was new to this condo, having moved in just a few months earlier. She had spent her whole life in New York but finally left to be closer to family. Her neighbor in the next condo was also Jewish and from the same small town in New York, so I knew the place would be a good fit.

What I did not know at first was that Irene, her neighbor, was not just Jewish—she was a Holocaust survivor. She had lived through the war in Poland as a young girl. Sitting at the kitchen table, she began to tell me her story, recounting her life in the Warsaw Ghetto. Miraculously, her father orchestrated her escape, hiding her in a sack of potatoes thrown over the ghetto wall. On the other side, a former colleague of her father—a Jewish woman who managed to pass as non-Jewish—was waiting to receive her.

For the next four years, they moved from place to place, with Irene often hiding in floorboards during Nazi sweeps. She survived the war but spent several more years struggling to make her way to the United States, where her one remaining family member, an uncle, had escaped before the war. Her journey took her to England, where she learned English; then to Canada, where she

finished high school; and finally to New York City, where she met her husband. He now sat across from me at that very table, reminding me of my own late grandfather.

Irene seemed pleased to share her story with someone who wanted to listen—someone who had just returned from Germany and still wanted to know more. She told me it had likely been 15 years since she had last recounted her full story. Yet, her memory was quick and sharp, correcting her husband, who was several years younger than her, any time he remembered something incorrectly.

I wish that were the end of the story. I wish we could say that what happened during the Holocaust was a horrific part of our past, but that it was indeed the past. Yet, a year and a half later, the world has changed drastically. Antisemitism has skyrocketed across the globe. The atrocities of the Holocaust have resurfaced, with October 7, 2023, marking the deadliest single day for Jews since the 1940s.

After October 7th, our Germany group checked in with one another—physically, ensuring those in Israel were safe, and emotionally for those with affected family and friends. In an unexpected twist, the German participant with deep Nazi family ties was studying in Israel on October 7th, protected by the IDF and Iron Dome.

The very people that her family sought to destroy, protected her life, and the lives of millions of other Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

I returned to Israel in June 2024 to volunteer in warehouses, hospitals, and produce farms. While there, I visited the October 7th massacre sites: the Nova Festival, the kibbutzim, and Sderot.

At the Nova site, I wrapped tefillin and recited the Shema, the central prayer in Judaism. Instantly, I was transported back to Sachsenhausen. I cried, thought about the tragedies surrounding me, and felt the same imposter syndrome—walking away from Nova, as so many of my Jewish brothers and sisters could not.

At that moment, I realized: the hate persists, whether it is 1943 or 2023. I opened my eyes to see a barren field of despair, just as I had opened my eyes a year earlier, to see the ovens. One year to the day later.

But I also left that trip feeling immense hope. Here is a society that has endured unimaginable loss. Almost everyone in Israel knows someone who was killed, injured, or taken hostage on October 7th. Many have loved ones fighting in Gaza or protecting the northern borders. Others are grappling with deep trauma, facing perpetual threats from all sides.

And yet, with all of that, the beaches of Tel Aviv are filled with young people juggling soccer balls. The clubs on Rothschild Boulevard are alive with dancing and singing. The Old City of Jerusalem still feels the same as it did when I first visited as a child.

To grieve the ones you have lost, fight an ongoing multi-front war, and still find a way to live a semblance of normal life is something truly extraordinary to witness.

Hopefully, one day soon, I will stand arm-in-arm with a Palestinian friend at the site of the Nova Festival massacre the way I stood with a German friend in the crematorium of a concentration camp.