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Lévy, Bernard-Henri. *Israel Alone. A Wicked Son Book, an imprint of Post Hill Press, 2024.*

Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

Before reading this brilliant new manifesto, “Israel Alone,” I knew very little about the French writer, filmmaker, playwright, war correspondent, and social activist Bernard-Henri Levy. Finding his work felt like an act of divine providence since I have been hurting watching what is happening to us Jews again. I found Levy’s defiant arguments persuasive and therapeutic. He seemed to be saying what I was feeling; and doing so in a way I found healing; almost as if I had found an accidental soulmate. Although I often write about Jewish luminaries, I have never reviewed any of Levy’s 46 books which he has written during his 76 years. He is known in France as a maverick, loved by many for his ballsiness and reviled by others. He has spent the last few years in Ukraine chronicling the Russian invasion. When his phone began beeping on October 7th, he immediately flew to Israel grasping the gravity of the cataclysm that had once again befallen the Jewish people.

Levy is unapologetic about his passionate Zionism which overtook him as a young man after he visited Israel shortly after the Six-Day-War. He found in Israel “the most unexpected of inner homelands. Thereafter, he remained steadfast in his conviction that “I will remain a Jew, I will keep being a Jew, and being a Jew means defending certain values, ideals, a creed, and a form of exceptionalism.” Levy has been a crusader of sorts bringing much needed attention to hot spots all around the world. He was instrumental in bringing about France’s intervention into the former Yugoslavia and Libya. He views his work as part of his Jewish mission to do as much as he can to mend the world.

Levy is not an open book. In fact, he dislikes personal questions in interviews, particularly about his past two marriages, or his current one to the famous French actress Arielle Dombasle. He doesn’t speak publicly of his two adult children who are both thriving in their respective careers. He has lived his entire life as a non-observant Jew. He was born in Algeria but moved to Paris while still a toddler. His father began a timber business which made an enormous fortune leaving Levy and his siblings extremely wealthy when they were still young adults. Still, wealth did not dampen his enthusiasm for making his mark on the world. He recalls being bullied in a schoolyard as a young boy for being Jewish, but Levy responded with his fists, which seems like a precursor of what was to come. He sounds hauntingly sentimental when he speaks of his father

who was a decorated fighter during the Allied invasion of Italy. His mother came from an esteemed line of rabbis in Algeria. Levy enjoyed an early flirtation with Marxism during his twenties in the late 1960s, but soon got over it. He feels drawn to the unique beauty of the Jewish faith and says, “My relationship to Judaism is the most important thread of my life as a committed intellectual.”

Levy arrived in Israel midday on October 7th. He writes, “Never had I seen it so desolate. Never had I imagined in the middle of an empty Menachem Begin Road, the remains of a dead jihadist covered with a blue tarp that left his blackened, ant-covered legs exposed and rotting in the blazing sun.” Levy bumps into Gideon Levy, a journalist with whom he had argued in the past, both “sharing an astonishment that left their disagreements behind.” In the kibbutzim, it was worse. Levy explains that those who had lived there were the “bastion of the lay, liberal, pacifist Zionism that was my first tie with Israel at the time of the Six-Day-War in 1967.” His thoughts wandered to Daniel Pearl, whom he had written about years ago in “Who Killed Daniel Pearl,” and whose parents he befriended after the tragedy that took their son’s life. Looking around, he felt baffled the Mossad had been fooled to such an extent as to miss the lead up of what would become the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust.

Levy becomes increasingly agitated by the stories already circulating online that doubted the veracity of the massacre. It reminded him of those who doubted what Hitler had begun doing to the Jews. He tells us about Jan Karski, a member of the Polish resistance, who told the members of the United States Supreme Court in 1942 about the atrocities that were taking place in Auschwitz where Jews were being gassed by the thousands. The justices did not believe him. He saw the same sort of perverse denial applied to Putin. The world watched as he built up over 300,000 troops on the Donbas border. Yet everyone pretended Putin wouldn’t be insane enough to invade Ukraine with dreams of usurping it.

Levy compares the war in Ukraine to the killing spree being carried out by Hamas, despite realizing the world’s intelligence services surely must have had the means to detect this assault. He cites a BBC analysis dated November 27, 2023, describing terrorists in 2020 engaging in a training session at nine different sites in the Gaza strip just a few meters from the security barrier. On another occasion, there was a simulation of the ‘liberation’ of the kibbutzim Be’eri and Kfar Azar shown on a dedicated Telegram channel. There was a final rehearsal on September 12, 2023,

which was also visible on Telegram where terrorists filmed themselves partaking in a mock assault and entering houses like those attacked on October 7th.

All this was happening under Israel's nose. Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar was negotiating with Israeli about easing the blockade which allowed him to receive materials to build tunnels and weapons. Every month he received millions of dollars from Qatar to pay civil servants. Hotels were being built and restaurants were sprouting up throughout Gaza. Yahya al-Sinwar seemed to have mellowed and was passing as a pragmatic moderate. Yet, this same man had been sentenced in Israeli courts multiple times to a life sentence. His brain cancer was treated successfully by Israeli surgeons. He was traded in a swap for Gilad Shalit. Once free, he set out to implement the most brutal and sophisticated attack in Israel's history.

Jews around the world shuddered hearing the voicemail of a terrorist calling his mother shouting "Mom, your son is a hero! I killed ten...ten with my own hands..." Levy was accustomed to terror and had spent years trying to intervene in the madness that infested Bangladesh, Rwanda, Darfur, Angola, Burundi, Somalia, and Afghanistan. But this felt different to him: "Evil was there. Pure evil, plain-faced, gratuitous, senseless. Evil for nothing and for no reason; evil raw and unadorned."

The world's initial reaction to the attack seemed to wither. There seemed to be either an eerie silence or absurd condemnations. Erdogan claimed, "Hamas was not a terrorist organization." Iran denied complicity though evidence surfaced showing their culpability. Hezbollah began firing rockets over Israel's northern border immediately. Houthis were terrorizing ships in the Red Sea thought to have an affiliation with the "Zionist entity." Xi Jinping allowed his airwaves to be flooded with antisemitic propaganda. The Chinese media claimed that Jews represent only 3% of the American population yet possess 70% of its wealth. Putin was happy to have attention diverted from his heinous crimes in Ukraine.

New York Congressman Jamaal Bowman called into question whether the Israeli women were really raped. Antisemitism in France soared. Representative Rashida Tlaib of Michigan declared her support for the "Palestinian resistance." The United Nations condemned Israel for its "suffocating occupation." The Red Cross looked away. UNRWA called the event a "splendid

spectacle.” Countries like France, Japan, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and many others offered a tepid response to the Israeli horror. Levy concludes “We Jews are alone. Always alone.”

Levy attempts to dismantle all the attacks thrust upon the Jewish state. He points out that Israel has been out of Gaza since 2005. He describes Israel as a country with two million Arabs who enjoy the same economic, social, and civil rights as their fellow citizens. He describes how in Israel there are more mayors and judges from the Arab minority than in any other democracy in the world. He speaks of the fact that Arabs are members of the Knesset and are permitted the “luxury of detesting Zionism” without fear that they might participate, when they can, in the formation of governing majorities. As for the Jews themselves, they are a varied lot. There are Arab Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Asian Jews, Ukrainian Jews, and Russian Jews. He adds that Israel is home to Druze, Arameans, Bedouin, and Circassians.

Levy concedes he finds increasingly dangerous the ultra-right ministers Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich and blames Netanyahu for clinging pathetically to them in an attempt not to lose power. But he describes this as a recent aberration, and points to Israel’s former leaders as more representative of the country’s outstanding history.

Levy attacks those who keep advising Israel to show restraint. He asks if anyone would propose restraint in dealing with ISIS? Or an appeasement strategy when dealing with Al Qaeda? He feels Israel is being held to an impossible standard. He is disappointed with Joe Biden’s continual pleas for Israel to show caution when this isn’t always synonymous with Israel’s ability to be victorious. And Levy understands Israel must be victorious. There is no other way. He is worried about Trump’s evangelicals who praise Israel but seem embedded in their own agenda rather than Israel’s ability to thrive. He finds Trump’s description of Jewish men as short Jewish guys with yarmulkes counting his money deeply offensive. He reminds us he has always been for a two-state solution but has grown exhausted waiting for the Palestinians to say, “We are weary of war, and we accept the 1947 resolution that decreed two states, despite the rejection of that resolution by our grandfathers, our fathers, and indeed, all of our leaders up to the present day.”

Levy is overcome by feelings of helplessness as he watches demonstrations in France where protestors are shouting “Death to Jews.” He refers to a Cornell professor with 12 million views who claims the massacre had “exhilarated him” because it “shifted the balance of power.” He is distressed by the demonstrations on college campuses, such as Rutgers, Yale, The New School, and Columbia, where he watches thousands screaming in support of Gazans and condemning Israel aggression. Social media has only amplified the hysteria.

He claims there have always been Jews on the land of Israel. He acknowledges there were Arabs as well, but they were not organized into a nation as we think of that term today. He addresses the Nakba conceding some Arab departures were forced but points out that 700,000 Jews were ousted from their native Arab countries when Israel was formed. They had less than a day to leave and could take nothing with them.

He believes Zionism emerged as a solution for the survival of a people who had almost been completely decimated by the Nazi assault. Israel was and still is their best hope. He admits “I wake up every morning and I go to sleep every night full of fear and anxiety about Israel.” He believes what is happening now is like what has happened throughout history. It is “The old hatred. The oldest of all hatreds.”

Levy is determined to keep fighting. But we hear how haunted he has become remembering conversations he had years ago with cherished old friends in France. He speaks tenderly of Albert Cohen, who wrote the masterpiece *Belle du Seigneur*, who would tell Levy to push back against non-Jews with all his might. But a few moments later, Cohen would whisper to Levy that in the end it won't matter. Cohen was certain we Jews will end up on a garbage heap somewhere forgotten by history. Another close friend, Romain Gary, once told Levy not to fear the non-Jewish world and to use his intelligence andchutzpah to “shove the Dybbuk up their ass.” Be Gary too would concede seconds later that it would soon be over anyway saying “Our existence is outrageous. I've known from the beginning we're expendable.” Claude Lanzmann of “Shoah” fame told Levy Jews are in constant threat of “falling prey to the Beast and its unlimited voracity.”

But Levy pushes away thoughts like these that might deter him. He refuses to surrender. He wants to make sure “Auschwitz is not repeated.” He explains that the founders of Israel understood this too. They wrote in their declaration of independence “The Nazi Holocaust demonstrates the urgency of solving the problem of Jewish homelessness by reestablishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish state.”

This essential truth is more prescient now than ever.