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Opinion

Editorial

Week by week

How best to respond to the annual hate fest known as "Israel Apartheid Week"?

Each year, the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) movement revs up on campuses to try to isolate Israel and its supporters. Its victories are few and far between, but its activists manage to rile Jewish leaders on campus and off. When the BDS movement touched down at the University of Pennsylvania earlier this month, a Jewish faculty member wrote an op-ed condemning the organizers and criticizing the university for allowing itself "to be associated with this hateful genocidal organization."

A very different tack was taken by David Bernstein, executive director of The David Project. In a JTA op-ed, Bernstein asserts that without the publicity provided by their pro-Israel opponents, BDS-ers won't be nearly as effective in getting their message out. Reacting to every anti-Israel infraction "creates a wonderful adrenaline rush," writes Bernstein; however, the real work that that must be done in supporting Israel is targeting influencers, from student government presidents to

campus Hispanic leaders, with a positive, pro-Israel message.

The leadership at Rutgers Hillel and the outside groups that support their work — including the state federation movement — seem to have struck the right balance between ignoring pro-Palestinian activities and overreacting. Hillel has planned a week not of counter-demonstrations and angry letters to the administration, but of presentations by Israelis representing the diversity of their democratic, pluralistic country. "We will show the many different sides of Israeli society so people can have the opportunity to see these many faces," Hillel Israel engagement director Tzvi Raviv tells *NJN*. "Instead of bashing their side, we will show the real Israel."

Newton tells us that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Recent polling suggests that the pro-Israel actions that are the most effective are ones that put a human face on Israel and provide an alternate narrative to the one-sided, distorted pictures painted by its opponents. Hillel deserves support for empowering Jewish students on campus, and for fighting lies with the truth.

Editor's Column

Heaven can wait

The *New York Times Book Review* had a little graphic recently charting sales of *Heaven is for Real*, a father's account of his four-year-old son's near-death experience and his three-minute trip to heaven. The book has been sitting atop the *Times* paperback nonfiction list for 53 weeks (non-consecutively). Since its publication in November 2010, it has sold some six million copies.

According to his father, a pastor, the boy recounted meeting a great-grandfather who died 30 years before he was born, and a sister who would have been born if not for the miscarriage his parents never told him about. He described the horse that Jesus rides, and talked about how "reaally big" God and His chair are.

Sales of the book are powered by questions as old as mortality itself: What happens after we die? How would we behave if we knew there is a heaven? If this book is on the "nonfiction" list, does someone owe James Frey an apology?

I have been asking a lot of questions about the afterlife lately, although in truth I could have said the same thing when I was four. The questions took on more urgency last year, however, when, in the immortal words of John Cleese, I had "run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible." For a few seconds, anyway.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a modest literature about people who have "crossed over," but nothing like *Heaven is for Real*. More like "Heaven is for sermons." Typical of the Talmud is the story of Rav Huna, who dies and comes back to life. Rav Papa asks him what he saw. Huna replies that he heard

God pronounce to the heavenly court, "Since Rav Huna was forgiving of others in his lifetime and didn't demand strict judgment, we shall not judge him harshly and he shall return to life." (*Rosh Hashanah* 17a)

Convenient, no? But even that is the Jewish way — not to dwell too much on what happens after this life, but to confront mortality as a way of examining this life.

Everyone who hears I had a near-death experience wants to know what I have "learned." The near-death literature is full of religious conversions, vows to lead a different life, carpe diem epiphanies. People quote A.J. Ayer, Zhuang Zhou, Wittgenstein.

I recall a book by Stanley Alpert, a former assistant U.S. attorney who was kidnapped by thugs for a terrifying 24 hours in 1998. In *The Birthday Party*, the changes Alpert describes after surviving his ordeal are both modest and profound.

On the modest side he now orders the more expensive sushi dish, rather than the cheaper "special" that included some squishy brown roe he never ate anyway. He always wanted a dog. He got a dog. He wanted a car. He got one. The chapter is called "Get What You Want." He writes, "Don't wait until the kids are grown to go out on a Saturday night movie date with your wife because the babysitter charges 15 dollars an hour."

He also wondered whether God had a purpose for him — whether in keeping him alive, or putting him through the ordeal in the first place: "Is there some mission I am destined to accomplish?"

That sense of mission, he said, gave him the courage to save a man who fell onto the

subway tracks and to rescue a drowning woman.

Or as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once put it, "The deepest wisdom man can attain is to know that his destiny is to aid, to serve."

I'm afraid I'll always disappoint those who want to know what happened on the "other side." Did I go into the light? How many people did I meet in heaven? Does God have a beard?

The answers are no, none, and I couldn't find out. I do remember opening my eyes and seeing the faces of relatives. But I was in a hospital bed — in Englewood.

And I did see the light — and it shone on my wife, my children, my family, and my community. The incident and its aftermath threw into sharp relief how much I love them, to the point that I worry that I can never show my gratitude enough.

I saw a community shower us with love and concern and — this is important — concrete acts of loving-kindness. Meals. Rides. Shoulders to lean on. And, when we needed it, a little space. Sometimes what people need the most is nothing at all.

I didn't see anything when I crossed over, but I did see this when I came back: "People who were important to me before only became more important to me after," as Alpert puts it.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer suggests that people should live every day with the same moral intensity as they would if it were the last.

That, I insist, is asking way too much.

But we do need to set aside moments to appreciate what would happen if all this were taken from us. Would we love more? Live more? Sin less?

Those are questions worth asking. For real.



Andrew
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