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## “An age-old bias haunts Israel”

by [Michael Gerson](#)

The monumental [tapestry triptych by Marc Chagall](#) that hangs in the State Hall of the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem hints at some of the artist’s memories, including some from his childhood in Vitebsk, Russia. But these float among images of Jewish history: of Moses with his tablets, of David with his harp. Images of wandering and vulnerability: a village burned, a dead body surrounded by six candles, standing in for 6 million. Images of return and security: pioneers, soldiers and a new flag among the nations.

The viewer is immersed in the sweep of a great, inexplicable story — of an ancient people seized by a sense of identity that has lasted four millennia, that has made foundational contributions to ethics, social justice and rational inquiry, and that has often been requited with suspicion and violence. Many Jews, religious or secular, embracing or resisting, feel the glory and burden of this history.

[In a recent essay, Matti Friedman](#), a reporter for the Associated Press in Jerusalem between 2006 and 2011, recalls being forced to weave a different story: of Israeli oppression and Palestinian victimhood. He says his editors consistently spiked reporting inconsistent with this narrative, even when it included major news (such as details of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s peace offer). Friedman describes his superiors as “decent people” who used news coverage as “a weapon to be placed at the disposal of the side they like.” His evidence of bias is damning; his evidence of decency is thin.

Friedman blames this “severe malfunction” of journalism on the resurgence of an old pattern. Historically, Jews have been a stateless entity on which people have projected their anger and resentments. With the advent of a Jewish state, those projections are focused on Israel, which gets disproportionate (and disproportionately hostile) attention as the embodiment of colonialism and nationalism — things that European and American liberals find offensive.

“You don’t need to be a history professor, or a psychiatrist, to understand what’s going on,” [says Friedman](#). “The descendants of powerless people who were pushed out of Europe and the Islamic Middle East have become what their grandparents were — the pool into which the world spits. The Jews of Israel are the screen onto which it has become socially acceptable to project the things you hate about yourself and your own country. The tool through which this psychological projection is executed is the international press.”

Friedman’s editors might protest that they are simply covering Israeli policy (which can be unwise) and Palestinian suffering (which is very real). But Friedman accuses the media of purposely slanting stories, in a way they would not (for example) about violence in Pakistan or the Congo. And there must be some reason. Many in the knowledge class have an inadequate understanding of and respect for history. In this case, they seem to think that traditional anti-Jewish attitudes have faded and that the memory of the Holocaust is overplayed (and used by Jews to provoke self-protective guilt). In fact, anti-Jewish attitudes remain deep and consistent, and the memory of the Holocaust is fading. Few take note of the genocidal promises of the Hamas charter or of Iranian clerics.

If you live entirely in the present, the state of Israel may seem more Goliath than David. If you have some sense of the past, it is a beleaguered island in a historical and geographical sea of violence. It is, in the words of [British historian Paul Johnson](#), the “physical guarantee that another Holocaust would not occur.” And the creation and maintenance of this secular Zion have involved a series of sad compromises — walls and airstrikes and nuclear capabilities — required to maintain a Jewish state in a hostile neighborhood.

History matters, or at least it should. Detached from its story, Israel is a quarrelsome, flawed democracy on the edge of the Mediterranean. But Israel is its story — the story of slavery, statehood, expulsion, scattering, near-extermination and return. The story told by Chagall in 40 miles of thread.

This is not, for me, primarily a theological matter. It is not necessary to believe that the Jews are the chosen people to believe that they have been unfairly chosen for more than 2,000 years for persecution and murder — and have chosen themselves, by their unity and courage, to carry a hope and cause that transform their story into something universal. Even some Jews might prefer it otherwise — as Moses was reluctant to accept his calling. But it is hard to argue with a burning bush, or with history.

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