

HYPERALLERGIC

Opinion

I'm Jewish and I Don't Want to Leave Again

America was our promised land but we might not be safe here anymore.



by Deborah Kass
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Deborah Kass, "It's Hard To Be A Jew" (2003), 72 x 96 oil on canvas
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We thought it wouldn't happen here. Yet we knew it could.

America was our promised land. For any American Jew alive now, America saved your family one, two, or three generations ago. Three of my four grandparents fled Ukraine (then Russia) and Belarus, sites of famous pogroms. My great-grandparents from my mother's side fled Hungary. My father's parents had accents so thick I could barely understand them.

Ancestors? Killed somewhere in Eastern Europe. My parents didn't know them and my grandparents didn't speak of them. If the Cossacks didn't get them, the Nazis did. It was the same for every Jewish kid I grew up with in our insulated New York suburb.

In the big cities, being somewhat White, if still different, we have flourished here for three or four generations, especially those of us lucky enough to grow up in post-war America. Our fathers fought in the wars, then went to college on the GI Bill, and a huge middle class was born. Jewish excellence in business, the arts, and sciences exploded. We were safe here.

And yet when I was a child my reoccurring nightmare was of armed Russians or Nazis knocking on our suburban front door to take us all away.

At 10:00am on September 11, 2001, in Tribeca on West Broadway, where I lived for 25 years, I told my partner Pattie to pack a bag with her original slides and underwear and change of clothes in case we had to flee. When my friend asked how did you know to do that, I said: "I have been waiting for this my whole life."

We left at noon after the World Trade Center's Twin Towers fell. That dust rolled by the windows, as we huddled on the other end of the loft with rumors of fireballs coming from the west side and cops saying it might be a good idea to leave now.

When to leave? That's the question every Jew has embedded in our DNA. When did people know to leave Germany? Russia? Where do you go? What do you take? What do you leave behind? How will you live, if you live?

We are waiting for the midterms and then we will decide.

They say antisemitism is the oldest hatred. But it is hard to know who is historically more hated: Jews, women, or homosexuals. There is the problem of human nature and the question: Why do things never really change? But having those three giant targets on my back, the time might be now.

I don't want to leave. I still harbor my fantasy that New York City secedes. I would stay here. The real land of E Pluribus Unum (out of many, one).

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