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more than 100 hostages still captive in Gaza. Absent was any audible disagreement from the crowd to the reference to the “genocide unfolding in Palestine.”

Two award winners used their acceptance speeches to express similar sentiments, notable also for their erasures. Safiya Sinclair, who took the autobiography prize for her memoir “How to Say Babylon,” suggested that her Rastafarian background informed her views:

As a daughter of Rasta rebellion, I know that none of us are free until all of us are free ... which means we wish to see all downpressed people free from the shackles of colonial violence. I pray for an end to the genocide in Gaza and I wish to see a free Palestine in my lifetime, a free Sudan, a free Haiti, a free Congo.

Roxanna Asgarian, winner in nonfiction for “We Were Once a Family: A Story of Love, Death, and Child Removal in America,” concluded her acceptance speech as follows:

This book is about what can and does happen when our systems and our government place less value on certain children’s lives than on others. Because of that, I want to add to the chorus of people demanding a permanent ceasefire and an end to the inhumane conditions in Gaza. Every child deserves to survive and thrive, their inherent dignity intact. Thank you.

Asgarian did not include among those children the Bibas boys, kidnapped with their parents from Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7 (Kfir was then 9 months old; big brother Ariel, 4), and now, six months later, are still held hostage in Gaza. If she was aware of the varieties of trauma inflicted on Israeli children on Oct. 7 and beyond, or the Israeli children who witnessed their parents being slaughtered in their own homes, or the tens of thousands of displaced families from the communities attacked on Oct. 7 and those to the north under threat from Hezbollah, she didn’t mention them.

I can’t be certain what I would have done in the moment, had I been part of the audience. Surely, I wouldn’t have applauded Kuipers’, Sinclair’s, or Asgarian’s speeches. Had I attended the customary after-party, I might have angled for a moment with another awardee, Marion Winik. After congratulating her for the NBCC Service Award she received for her

longtime engagement and leadership, I might have thanked her for her speech’s concluding line: “Long live the NBCC, and peace in the Middle East,” the evening’s only other — and most benign and compassionate — reference to the war.

Winik’s speech also referenced the advances in diversity and inclusion that the NBCC had made since the fraught moment after the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. Those efforts make these resuscitated echoes of my earlier NBCC experience all the more distressing.

I emailed NBCC with my concerns, saying that I was writing about the ceremony and that I hoped the one-sided remarks made there “were not a sign of more worrisome developments to come.” Heather Scott Partington, president of the NBCC, thanked me for my email and said she would “share your thoughts and concerns with the rest of the board.”

I have been tracking resolutions and statements by literary organizations that are compromised by both distortions of the historical record and ongoing demonization of the state of Israel, Israelis, and/or the vast majority of Diaspora Jews who are not anti-Zionists. Many of us are grappling with how this growing toxicity over Israel should shape our own participation in the larger community. Sometimes, the question boils down to this: Assuming that our own commitment to Jewish peoplehood or Israeli citizenship doesn’t automatically exclude us, do we even want to remain part of literary spaces that clearly don’t welcome us as our full selves? How much effort are we able and willing to expend — and how many times — trying to explain and educate those who simply aren’t aware of the harm that’s being caused? And what do we do in those cases where no amount of explanation or education can overcome sheer anti-Israel antisemitism?

I still haven’t decided whether I’ll renew my NBCC membership when the dues invoice arrives. But this much is certain: These circumstances aren’t limited to me and the NBCC. The questions and dilemmas remain — and will, I suspect, grow only more acute — for other writers, regarding other organizations, too.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo, JTA or its parent company, 70 Faces Media.

Happy Tears

By Lauren Sachs

Lauren holds a bachelor’s degree in English and Psychology, and a Master’s Degree in Social Work, from the University of Michigan. After completing advanced clinical training at Yale University, Lauren worked as a therapist and consultant in a variety of settings. During her time in Jewish Toledo, Lauren has received the Harry Levison Young Leadership Award and the Shining Light Award, and is currently a board member of the Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo. Lauren is also the author of a forthcoming book about her late husband, his joyful approach to life and work as an oncologist, and how examining his life helped her better cope with her grief. To learn more about Lauren’s journey and her work on living well after loss, visit www.literally-lauren.com.



May is often recognized as a month of milestones and celebrations, from spring flowers to weddings, and from Mother’s Day to graduation ceremonies. Of these observances, several mark the passage of time, but some are more specifically understood as marking the end of a given era or, conversely, the dawning of a new one. Rather than considering the juxtaposition of endings and beginnings, I prefer to consider it as a time of transition: moving from one stage of life into another with all the complexity, nostalgia, and feeling that it invokes. This May marks just such a transition in my

own family as my older daughter graduates from high school this month. While there is much to celebrate and so much history to honor, it is also a time filled with a mixture of emotions. As my husband died quite literally the week before our older girl started high school, the end of this time feels especially charged for all of us.

In the process of sharing about how I have learned to live with grief, I have made a conscious decision to write very little about my daughters and their own personal grief journey. With all they have already had to face, it has been especially important to protect them and their privacy in the wake of their father’s passing. Still, as someone with a background in child and adolescent therapy, I feel it is important to share a bit of my own perspective on helping a young person cope with such a tremendous loss. As with so many aspects of helping children and adolescents, I believe the most important piece of helping a young person cope with grief begins with listening to them and following their lead. Everyone’s way of grappling with grief is different. Even in my own family, I have observed a great contrast between my own daughters and how they expressed their feelings and mourned their father. I firmly believe there is no right or wrong way to grieve a loss, so I have tried to honor my daughters’ unique needs when it comes to adjusting to life without their father. Along with listening and following their lead, I felt it was imperative to offer as much stability and consistency in their daily lives as possible. As my girls’ world was turned upside down by the pandemic and the sudden loss of their father, I wanted to give them a sense that other aspects of their environment could feel solid and predictable.

Just like attending a spousal loss support group has helped me find a special sort of camaraderie and understanding, it was also incredibly useful to hear the stories of those who lost their parents as children or in young adulthood. Friends, acquaintances, and even perfect strangers came forward to tell me about losing their mother or father. Those who offered their stories of parental loss often longed to be given time and space to mourn their late parent, sharing painful times when unthinking individuals encouraged them to simply “move on” or disregarded their need for mourning. I also learned how those who lost a parent in their youth needed to grieve the loss anew each time they reached a new stage in life. It was obviously heartbreaking to lose a parent in the first place, but the same wound was opened again and again each time they wondered what it might have been like to have their parent see them in a relationship with a significant other, graduate from college, or - eventually - have their own children. These long-term mourners wished for a chance to talk things over with the deceased parent, introduce them to their new loves, and show their parents how they had navigated all the challenges of “adult-ing.” I am so honored to have heard the stories of my fellow mourners and will keep all this in mind as I continue charting the unpredictable waters of grief both for myself and for my family. Most of all, I hope the love, patience, and acceptance I have shown my own children will help them show the same to others.

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