

Two Historic Rallies Of American Jewry: 1938 And 2023

By AMY NEUSTEIN, Ph.D.

Last week, as nearly 300,000 demonstrators from across the country assembled in Washington, DC for the “March for Israel” rally at the National Mall, a significant milestone in American Jewish history was reached. Jews from all over America – Texas, California, Illinois, Michigan, Georgia, Massachusetts and New York – came to DC for the largest public gathering in Jewish history. They came on planes, buses – some traveling over 16 hours through the night – and in cars. They came to show solidarity with Israel as it wages a war in the Gaza Strip in response to the Hamas October 7 massacre. They likewise came to show a unified voice for the urgent release of 240 Israelis taken hostage by Hamas.

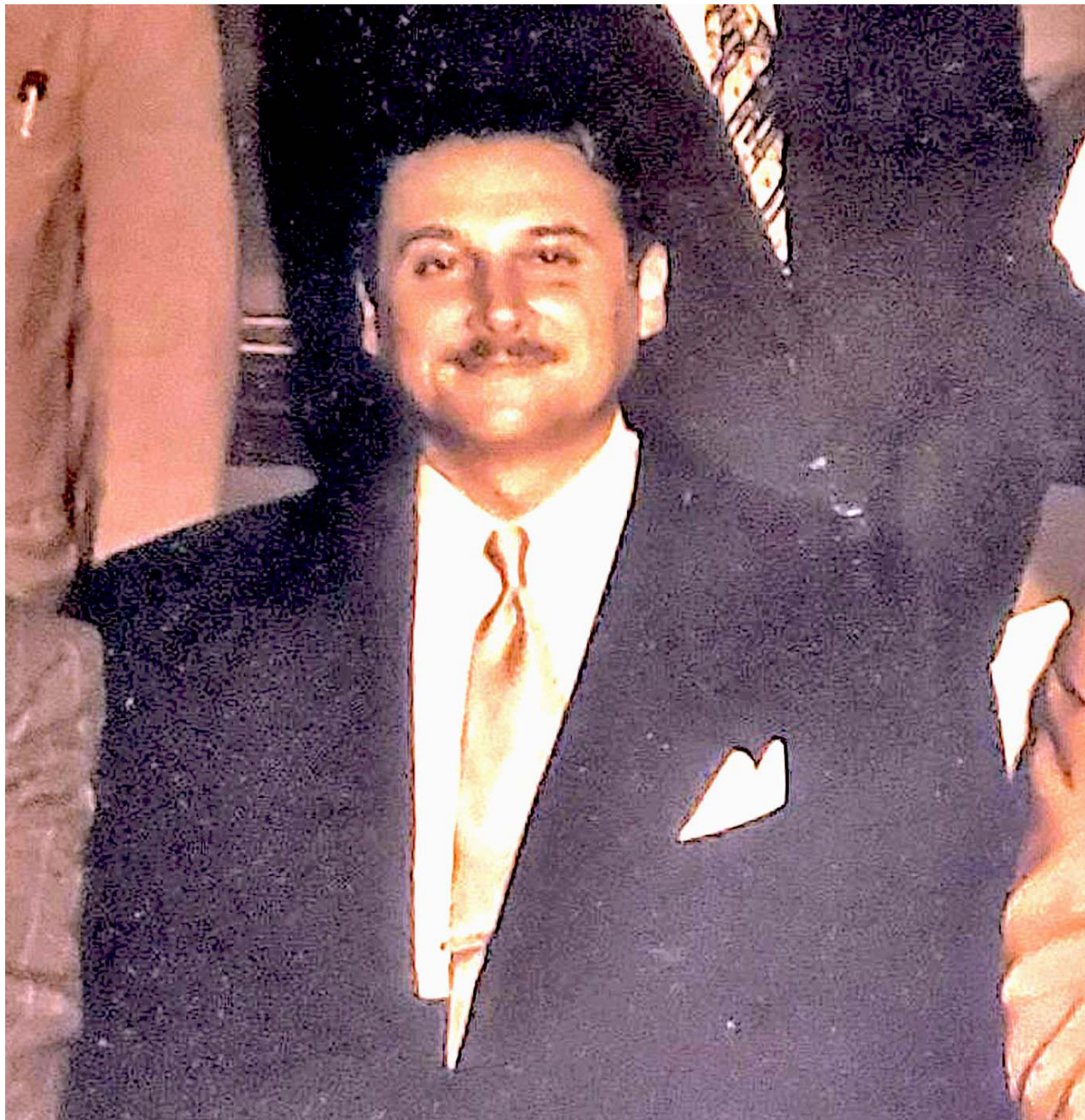
But the overarching theme of the rally was just as important: a resounding display of unity against the present existential threats to world Jewry since the October 7 bloodbath in Israeli towns and kibbutzim along the Gazan border. Harkening back to yesteryear, in the past month we saw swastikas emblazoned on the exterior of hundreds of buildings in France, loud protests in England deprecating Israel, and the terrorizing of Jewish students on college campuses in the United States.

Yes, such venomous attacks on Jews present an existential threat to our survival. Every Jew present at the rally understood that. Uncannily, almost on the same day in November, 65 years ago, three simultaneous mass rallies were held in Boro Park to denounce, repudiate and decry antisemitism. The year was 1938, an ominous time in Jewish history when the world descended into a cauldron of madness. The *Brooklyn Eagle* covered these rallies. Their news heading read: “Boro Park Rallies Hit Nazi Atrocities.”

The paper reported, “Approximately 2,000 persons attended three Zionist mass meetings...in Borough Park to discuss the atrocities in Germany and the report of the Greater Action Committee.” Since in 1938 few people owned cars and mass transit sections of Brooklyn was still primitive, the meetings were held at different locations so that most could arrive on foot.

The event was coordinated by Samuel J. Borowsky, president of the Borough Park Zionist Organization. My father, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Neustein of the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach, who passed away in 2002, was a keynote speaker at these 1938 rallies. He was 26 years of age at the time and was studying for *semicha* at RIETS. Yet he was already a central voice in American Jewry.

Historian and *Yated Ne’eman* writer Yitzchok Shteierman would explain in a feature story on my father last month how he came to prominence at such a young age: “In 1931, at the tender age of 19 he [Rabbi Neustein] as-



The author’s father, circa 1952 (Courtesy of Dr. Amy Neustein)

sumed his first rabbinic pulpit at Beth Israel of Boro Park. There he led the shul with dedication and oversaw the Talmud Torah. The first evidence of Rabbi Neustein’s presence at Beth Israel comes from a *Brooklyn Eagle* article from November of 1938.” He points out that my father, as the rabbi of Beth Israel, served as a lead speaker at this mass rally.

In the 1960s, as a young girl I grew up hearing stories from my father about the amazing turnout at the 1938 rallies on that cold Sunday in November. My father would tell me about his colleague and dear friend, Rabbi Israel Schorr, leader of Congregation Beth El, who also spoke at the rally that day. He said both he and Rabbi Schorr were “deeply encouraged” by the turnout. He told me how Borowsky, the organizer of these Boro Park rallies, had taken him aside and urged him to impress upon his congregants the need for Jews to have their own land. My father said his life changed that day. Reiterating the words of Borowsky, he told me, “The dream of Zionism must be realized for only then shall Jews have a safe haven free from the threat of extinction.”

Many years later, it would become evident that my father kept the promise he made to Borowsky. Hanging on the wall of his office/

study at the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach was a “Maccabee Certificate of Honor” from State of Israel Bonds issued to him in 1967. It read: “In recognition of exceptional service during Maccabee month in helping to sustain the economy of Israel following the costliest war in its history when only the greatest sacrifices of its people, backed by a historic demonstration of solidarity on the part of American and Canadian Jewry, made it possible for the State of Israel to survive the greatest challenge to its existence.”

As Jews, we are intrinsically aware of the divine presence at a mass gathering. When G-d handed down the Torah he did so at a mass gathering at Mount Sinai. There we received the greatest gift of knowledge, direction and insight en masse. When we came together in 1938 at the nadir of our existence, we were fortified and emboldened by the Zionist dream. When we came together last week at the National Mall in Washington, we experienced an exhilaration that is ineffable because we saw how our strength and fortitude can triumph in the face of the greatest massacre since the Holocaust. Both rallies, past and present, signify turning points for American Jewry; and they will forever be embedded in Jewish history.