

**NEWS**

# A Legion of Their Own

Knees trembling no more, American Jews of all ages are learning self-defense

BY SUZY WEISS

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**O**N THE THIRD FLOOR OF A NONDESCRIPT BUILDING, ABOVE A SALON specializing in eyelash extensions, four men and three women are deep into practicing roundhouse groin kicks when I shuffle into the room a few minutes late. I take my spot near the door at the very front of the class—the Manhattan-wide punishment for lateness to a group workout. But this particular class doesn't promise a bikini body, or ab-shredding, or a mind-body-soul connection for 40 bucks plus shoe rental.

The group is Legion, a self-defense training network that partners with gyms and martial arts schools in the greater New York area. Their mission is to untremble Jews' knees by teaching us how to fight back against the antisemites that seek to do us harm—by throwing fireworks at us, pelting our children with eggs, punching us in the face—or worse.

Everyone in the class wears the same black-and-white T-shirt that reads: "From Strength Comes Freedom." The phrase was coined by Jon Loew, who co-founded Legion with Meredith Weiss (no relation). "Jews will only be free when we can rely on our own strength and need not rely on others," he says of the tagline.

If you are going to take this class, a bit of advice: Lay off the porterhouse at Peter Luger the night before. Just say no to the second round of Negronis, and if you can

avoid it, schedule the class a few more days past a high-decibel, tequila-soaked bachelorette trip to Miami. And definitely don't spend the afternoon leading up to the class gnawing on the leftover T-bone of said porterhouse on your couch, staring off into the middle distance like some sort of weary animal.

Otherwise, you will be like me, doubled over on a mat cowering below Rhon Mizrachi, a strong Israeli man with tribal tattoos, who, with mercy in his blue eyes, says, "If you really can't do the pushup you can just hold the position."

For an hour, we did warmups, then drills to nail down our form for moves like knee strikes and counterpunches, incorporating variations in the event of attacks from behind, from the side, and from straight on. There were high knees, there were more pushups, and there was partnered practice. Then, sparring. Then, the next day, I couldn't walk.

Weiss, who co-founded Legion in 2014, during the last bout of violence between Israel and Gaza, tells me that upward of 400 cadets have graduated from the program. She and Loew are also founding members of "Fuel for Truth," an Israel advocacy group they formed following 9/11. "It's about being prepared," says Weiss, 45, who named the group after the five Jewish battalions led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who fought against the Ottomans in World War I in then-Palestine.

Jabotinsky's battalions were composed of young male fighters from the Pale of Settlement and other European refugees who had been expelled from Palestine by the Ottomans and were living in Egypt. Weiss tells me that today's Legion is a mixed bag. Manhattan sees millennials, while the group in West Hartford is a bit older, in their 50s and 60s. The Brooklyn crowd is more strictly observant, and the Long Island contingency includes a lot of young, modern Orthodox families. The two trainees I spoke to after class spent the first few years of their lives in the Soviet Union.

“They understand a lot of what American Jews don’t get yet,” says Weiss, who lives in Long Island. “They have parents and grandparents who’ve lived through it and fled.”

“It’s high time Jews stop turning the other cheek,” Daniil Goldin, 31, who was born in Russia and raised in Manhattan tells me. “Too many of our fellow Jews unfortunately refuse to see the reality that no matter how much you say, ‘I’m liberal or I’m this or I’m that,’ everyone will always say, ‘But you’re Jewish. It doesn’t matter if you’re religious or atheist. It doesn’t matter. You’re still a Jew.’” The class has given him “the feeling of having my head held high.”

Olga, an attorney born in Ukraine, who lives on Staten Island, adds, “People always say, ‘How did they not know? How did they not see it coming? How did they let it get so far before they realized what was going on?’ Currently, I don’t know how far it’s going. But some of the recent news should make people understand how far it can progress.”

In another time, perhaps Goldin and Olga would have joined a band of partisan warriors in the Belarusian forest, or trained with the combatants in the Catskills at camps set up by the extremist Jewish Defense League in the ’90s. Today, they are part of a broader network of sustained Jewish self-defense efforts, led by Jews who are fighting for their dignity and safety in the wake of a digital revolution that sees vile Jew-hatred leap from online forums onto the pavement every day.

In addition to classes like Legion, there are groups teaching the people of the book to wield the sword. The Cherev Gidon Israeli Tactical Training Academy operating out of Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Florida has been teaching the tribe to defend themselves, specifically with Uzis, pistols, and rifles, for nine or so years. In the Bronx, Rabbi Sensei Greg Moskowitz, a black belt in both jujitsu and karate and ordained through Kollel Ayshel Avraham, has been teaching “counterterrorism classes,” sometimes involving axes, and martial arts for decades. After a spate of attacks in Monsey, Jersey City, and Brooklyn in December 2019, applications for

gun permits in Rockland County soared. In fact, some Jews armed themselves to the teeth.

In California, Magen Am, which translates to “Shield of the Nation,” has been busy training and installing security teams in Jewish neighborhoods in Los Angeles. There are also the Shmira and Shomrim patrols, private Jewish police forces stationed across the five boroughs in New York and in other places with big religious populations, poised to respond to crises faster than the city police.

In 2015, a few months after Legion’s alpha class graduated, I was dating a French guy in Brooklyn who was part of a similar group back home in Paris. He volunteered with the SPCJ, the Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive, or the Jewish Community Protection Service. The organization has since dissolved into a larger effort, OJE, which covers all of Europe. Brutal attacks on France’s Jews following the Charlie Hebdo attacks, including the hostage crisis at a kosher supermarket, stabbings outside of synagogues and on the streets of Nice, rapes, a machete attack, and, more recently, the unthinkable defenestration of Sarah Halimi, caused a wave of aliyah of French Jews and galvanized young ones like Elliot, my then-boyfriend, to take action.

Elliot would tell me how, at 16, he was recruited by a self-defense group of Jewish teens and men, who gathered—in Jewish school gyms, orchestra pits, and synagogue parking lots—to train in Krav Maga. In Paris, Elliot would stand guard in front of a synagogue during Shabbat, where he would case, question, and occasionally search the people there for knives and bombs, having been trained by an airline flight attendant who explained what questions to ask and what size of bag should set off alarm bells.

As he explained, I'd think, "Wow, given the rise of a toxic, identity-obsessed politics bolstered by the information revolution, fueling collective paranoia and deep distrust of Western institutions, the seeds of despotism and antisemitism are being fertilized, and this disturbing trend will inevitably come to American shores." Or it was, "Sounds hot!" I can't remember.

Back in my apartment, after class, I immediately began throwing up the weekend's decadences. I debated getting Dramamine express-delivered through an app on my phone. And I caught the reflection of my nose in the mirror, which was remade in the image of Jennifer Aniston in paparazzi pictures from 2006 when I was 19. My ex, who is no longer active in the group, now lives in London and has a wife and a baby. I have reservations at a cocktail bar downtown. When I met him, he would tell me that he felt Jewish Americans saw the world through "deez pint-tinted glass-says."

I have no idea what it really looks like to make sacrifices for my people. I'm barely capable of having uncomfortable conversations with friends. I really do not want a gun. I shudder to think how far the tide will come up when the next wave crashes.

Meredith tells me that for her part, the phone has been ringing off the hook since the latest attacks. "We're slammed with inquiries from all over, including from Canada," she says. Magen Am raised \$529,998 in one week during their fundraiser this month, and has plans to add another eight army veterans, from the U.S. and Israel, to their armed patrols in July.

"I would much rather get hurt than to run away or put my head down," said Rhon. He's fired up, hoping to begin teaching classes for Legion in firearm training and knife-wielding soon. The organization itself is planning to expand past the Northeast and across the country with courses on subjects beyond self-defense, like situational awareness, active shooter protocols, and emergency first aid.

During class, Olga, the Ukrainian attorney, instructs me to choke her. I meekly place my hands around her neck. "No, like, really choke me," she says. Oh, right.

She teaches me to stiffen my neck. It's my turn, and when she puts her hands around my throat, I immediately lift my shoulders to my ears, which is exactly what you're not supposed to do.

Olga asks me, gently, "Why are you closing your eyes?"

Suzy Weiss is a reporter for Common Sense.

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#KRAV MAGA