

Confronting Anti-Semitism In Our Own Day

Rabbi Todd A. Markley – *Kol Nidrei 5780*

I am blessed to have known both of my grandfathers and to have heard their life stories from them first-hand while they were still with us. On my father's side of the family, my grandfather, Ludwig, had to flee Europe with my grandmother and uncle. Sensing the oncoming onslaught of Nazi aggression and the rising tide of anti-Semitism, they were among the fortunate ones who were able to find safe passage off the continent that would soon descend into horror for Jews.

My mother's father, Aram, was chased out of his birthplace on the isle of Crete for the crime of being Armenian. His family had to run by night, under the cover of darkness, until they made their way to the shore and boarded a boat bound for Ellis Island. Both of these men – each a refugee in his own right – left possessions, a home, family members, and lives behind in order to find what they hoped would be a brighter future for themselves and their children in the *Goldene Medina* – the Golden Land of freedom and opportunity in America.

I am, to be sure, the grateful and humble beneficiary of their foresight and profound courage. Growing up in Fairfield, Connecticut, my youth was the one my grandfathers had dreamed of for me, and the persecution that they suffered seemed a world away in both time and space. I lived under the banner of religious freedom that had been at the very center of the nation's founding. The Liberty Bell bore an inscription taken from the scriptures of my people's sacred text. While I did not travel to Israel for the first time until I had graduated from high school, I grew up with the security blanket of knowing that – no matter what happened, I would always have a safe haven to call home – a sanctuary and refuge that my Hungarian grandfather could barely have imagined in his youth.

I felt the presence of my grandfathers beside me - as I stood with so many of you - outside of Needham's Chabad house in May for the ritual of *Havdallah*. Just 48 hours earlier, an arsonist had targeted their home in the middle of the night...and on that very night the same was attempted at the Chabad house in Arlington. Which was just nineteen nights after the last day of Passover...when we completed our Exodus to freedom only to learn that Pharaoh had triumphed once again at the Chabad in Poway, California...which was exactly six months after the events at Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha Congregation in Pittsburgh sent shockwaves throughout our nation's Jewish community that are still being felt deeply a year later.

I crossed the street that night to thank the Needham police officers for being there with us. When I introduced myself as Rabbi Markley from Temple Beth Shalom, one of the officers recited my street address from memory and assured me that they would be patrolling near my home...just to be extra cautious. I felt an uncomfortable admixture of gratitude and profound unease. This all seemed new, disorienting, and confusing...as if someone had yanked back a curtain to reveal a different version of reality that was deeply unsettling.

Yet...isn't this always the feeling when anti-Semitism rears its ugly head? For anti-Semitism is not bound by the rules of logic and reason that we rely upon to make sense of our world. In fact, anti-Semitism makes no sense at all. If I were to ask you what an anti-Semite is opposed to, how would you answer that question? "Semite" isn't even a category of people..."Semitic" was a term coined in the 1700's to refer to a group of languages in Asia and northern Africa.¹ I think we are all keenly aware that anti-Semitism is not a worldview that stands in stark opposition to these languages.

In her new book on the topic, author, Bari Weiss, helps us to better understand anti-Semitism by differentiating it from other types of prejudice. She defines it as "an ever-morphing conspiracy theory in which Jews play the starring roles in spreading evil in the world...In the eyes of the racist, the person of color is inferior. In the eyes of the misogynist, the woman is something less than human. In the eyes of the anti-Semite, the Jew is...everything. He is whatever the anti-Semite needs him to be... Under Communism, Jews were the Capitalists...under Nazism Jews were the race contaminants."² We have, historically, been blamed for everything from economic downturns, to spreading the bubonic plague, to making our matzah with the blood of Christian children...each a patently absurd accusation...each costing thousands – or hundreds of thousands - of Jews their lives.

And, why are we seeing a resurgence of anti-Semitic incidents in our own nation today, with a 57% increase in such occurrences from 2016 to 2017 and nearly 2,000 incidents reported to the Anti-Defamation League in each of the last two years?³ First of all, the old unfounded anti-Jewish conspiracy theories find fertile soil in which to grow when nations choose to obfuscate facts, lie to their populace, and traffic in conspiracy theories of their own. These erode the trust in our country and its institutions, destabilize faith in the shared collective, and sew the seeds that will invariably germinate into hate for those who are most easily vilified and blamed, and all-too-often...that means us. In my lifetime, I cannot recall a time in which fewer citizens of this great land had secure faith in our government and institutions to keep us safe, healthy, and heading towards a brighter future.

Societies have often found solace in anti-Semitism during times of great upheaval, and it is similarly not a coincidence that U.S. anti-Semitism is on the rise at a time of rapid economic, demographic, and institutional changes being experienced in our nation today. According to the Anti-Defamation League's CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, only 13% of the nearly 1,900 anti-Semitic incidents in 2018 were carried out by members of white-supremacist groups..."What this suggests," he notes, "is that the rise of anti-Semitic incidents is not the result of a vast underground conspiracy and widespread

¹ Lipstadt, Debora E., Antisemitism: Here and Now, Shoken Books, New York, 2019

² Weiss, Bari, How to Fight Anti-Semitism, Crown Publishers, New York, 2019, p. 31-33

³ Anti-Defamation League's "Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents: Year in Review 2018" (<https://www.adl.org/2018-audit-H>)

recruitment by white nationalist groups...What we're seeing is actually much worse. What we are seeing is the normalization of anti-Semitism."⁴

And as anti-Semitism goes more mainstream, we Jewish Americans are now feeling the sting of antipathy from multiple directions. On one side, we find the likes of those marching with tiki-torches in Charlottesville. For them, as for their Nazi progenitors, we are a permanent other. What's worse, in their warped mindset, we are to be blamed for their economic stagnation, we are to be blamed for their perceived political powerlessness, and we are to be blamed for the racial demographic shifts in this nation we share. When I saw the news footage of the Charlottesville protestors chanting, "The Jews will not replace us," I completely misunderstood their intended message. I assumed they meant that we Jews will not replace white gentiles in universities, or the halls of power, or places of business. No, no. What they meant was that we Jews will not replace them by importing brown-skinned, or Muslim, or non-English-speaking immigrants from other lands to take their places. Remember...the assailant at the Tree of Life synagogue chose that congregation as his target because they had participated – along with hundreds of other Jewish communities – in Refugee Shabbat the prior week, redoubling our people's ancient commitment to care for the stranger in our midst.

And we suffer further when our political leaders fail to condemn and disavow the perpetrators of those acts both explicitly and forcefully. In 1984, when the Ku Klux Klan attempted – for the second time – to endorse Ronald Reagan's campaign for the presidency, Reagan wrote the following words to the Chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: "The politics of racial hatred and religious bigotry practiced by the Klan and others have no place in this country, and are destructive of the values for which America has always stood. Those of us in public life can only resent the use of our names by those who seek political recognition for the repugnant doctrines of hate they espouse...Democrats and Republicans alike must be resolute in disassociating ourselves from any group or individual whose political philosophy consists only of racial or religious intolerance, whose arguments are supported only by intimidation or threats of violence. We must, and will, continue our unified rejection of such elements of hate in our political life...."⁵

Jews are at their safest in this land – in any land – when the leaders at the top echelons of government speak without equivocation just like this. Reagan would never have suggested that there were "some very fine people" on both sides of the Charlottesville demonstrations.

And because anti-Semitism is a moving target - an amorphous set of ideas that allows the Jew to be the boogie-man par excellence – while we are targeted **by** white-supremacists for our inherent otherness, we are sometimes accused of **being** white

⁴ Weiss, p. 82

⁵ Letter to the Chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights Concerning the President's Views on the Ku Klux Klan, President Ronald Reagan, April 30, 1984. (<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/43084g>)

supremacists by others with whom we share this great nation. For some this charge is leveled at American Jewry because of the privileged status that many enjoy when compared with other minority or marginalized groups. Such skepticism – by people who should be our allies - makes it that much harder to have our voices heard when we are, in fact, the victims of discrimination, hatred, and even violence. And, when our allies voice such skepticism -- and, sometimes, blatantly anti-Semitic comments -- it creates barriers that make it more challenging for us to rise to their defense when they, themselves, suffer discrimination due to their minority status.

In addition, those who support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state are often accused of abetting the purportedly racist policies of Israel's government towards Palestinians and her own Arab citizenry. There is much to be said in response to these claims – several sermons' worth, I'm sure – but let me simply respond with these points for now:

First, while American Jews almost universally support Israel's right to exist, a majority also have strong critiques of one Israeli policy or another. This is healthy...just as it is to be a proud American with political concerns about this nation's policies and practices. Such thoughtful critiques – and their counter-arguments - are appropriate, should be welcomed, and are part of the ongoing dynamic shaping of the soul of the nascent Jewish state.

Second, reasonable critique of Israeli policy or practice all-too-often devolves into anti-Zionism, and calls for the destruction of the Jewish state in Israel. Well-intentioned people, many Jews included, are drawn towards causes like the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement as a way of offering a corrective to Israeli policies with which they disagree. The intent may be good, but the means are deeply problematic as the BDS movement has proven itself to be less concerned with shifting any particular Israeli policy and more concerned with delegitimizing Israel's existence and – in some cases - eliminating the state altogether.⁶

As former National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, put it: “No country is immune to criticism, nor should it be. But when that criticism takes the form of singling out just one country, unfairly, bitterly, and relentlessly, over and over and over, that's just wrong – and we all know it.”⁷ She would know, having been our Ambassador to the United Nations where, from 2012-2015, the UN General Assembly adopted 97 resolutions criticizing specific countries...83 out of 97 were against Israel. In 2016, 20 of 26 condemnatory country-specific resolutions adopted by the General Assembly exclusively targeted Israel. There were 3 on Syria, and one each on Iran, North Korea, and Crimea.⁸ These statistics – and countless others – make it hard to argue that anti-Zionism isn't laden with – or, in some cases, identical to – age-old anti-Semitism. Because of the stigmatization and delegitimization of Israel and the Jews who support her that are often part of these efforts, many settings – including several college

⁶ <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/bds-the-global-campaign-to-delegitimize-israel>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/29/susan-rice-gaza-hamas-israel-defends-john-kerry>

⁸ <https://unwatch.org/un-israel-key-statistics/>

campuses - have become inhospitable places for Jewish students who suffer their own discrimination, intimidation, and in some cases threats of violence.

And while all of that is taking place on the ground here in America, all that I've laid out here does not even begin to address the extremist ideologies that hold sway in many nations that teach anti-Semitism to their youth the way we strive to teach math or writing skills to our own. The export of these radical beliefs has rendered any number of cosmopolitan European cities all but uninhabitable to Jews who feel unsafe wearing a *magen david* necklace in public - never mind a *kippah* - for fear of harassment, verbal abuse, and even assault.

So, what are we to do in response to these emergent realities? A few initial thoughts:

- 1) This sermon was not a masters class on the history and present dangers of anti-Semitism in our world. Continue your own learning on these topics...doing this reading is like watching Schindler's List...you know you should, but you can always find something else you'd rather be doing. As this year's shofar blasts rouse us anew, these ought to be some of the lessons to which we all awaken ourselves.
- 2) Last year, on this night, I delivered a sermon about the deep tribal divisions between left and right in our nation. So wide is this divide among American Jewry that, as Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer of the Shalom Hartman Institute noted earlier this year, we have even turned anti-Semitism into a "blue vs. red" issue. Ask a left-leaning Jew what the greatest anti-Semitic threat is, and they'll point to neo-Nazis. Ask a right-leaning Jew what the greatest anti-Semitic threat is, and they'll point to the BDS movement and its ideological allies. Can't we come together in agreement that anti-Semitism in all its forms is bad and worthy of our vocal response?
- 3) To build on that point, I quote my colleague, Rabbi Angela Warnick-Buchdahl's words from last year's High Holy Days, "Be honest," she writes, "were you more outraged when Tamika Mallory [- one of the leaders of the Women's March -] refused to denounce [Louis] Farrakhan [a known and outspoken anti-Semite], or were you more outraged by Trump's inability to flatly denounce the white supremacists after Charlottesville? Are you making excuses for one of them? In order to be principled in this fight, we must be willing to call out the antisemitism on our *own side of the aisle*. It's easy to convince ourselves that the one on "our side" exists only at the powerless fringe, or that it's outweighed by more important ideological alliances. But we have to be as intolerant of antisemitism from our political allies as from our foes."⁹
- 4) We should avoid the temptation to get wrapped up in a contest to determine whose persecution is worse and whose existential crisis is going to win the day. It is possible for Jews to be subjected to bigotry, hatred, and violence, just as the same is true for women, African Americans, Muslims, and members of the

⁹ <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/yom-teruah-sounding-the-alarm-for-anti-semitism-rosh-hashanah-5779-2018>

GLBTQIA community, to name but a few. When we tell our stories to one another, let it be for the sake of shared understanding, collaboration, and partnership in healing the world's ills and not solely to prove that our experience with discrimination is worse or more valid than anyone else's. The text from Leviticus inscribed upon The Liberty Bell reads: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." Ensuring our own liberty does not relieve us of the responsibility to ensure it for the rest of America as well.

- 5) When we see or hear anti-Semitism, we need to speak up about it. This is uncomfortable when we are with people whose acceptance we seek, and can feel downright risky in the face of those who may intend us harm. But when we let it slide, we do ourselves no favors in the long run.
- 6) Rather than contribute to the divide in our country, let's build even stronger alliances and sturdier bridges. For all of the unease I felt outside the Needham Chabad house as we collectively processed a new kind of anti-Semitism arriving in our hometown, I felt an even greater measure of reassurance as I looked around to see so many members of Needham's Interfaith Clergy Association standing there with us in solidarity. That didn't happen by accident...it was the result of years of relationship-building...we ought be doing even more now.
- 7) And finally, let's not allow ourselves to be defined by others' prejudices against us. The best antidote to anti-Semitism is a strong, confident, positive Jewish identity of which we can be proud. That means embracing tradition rather than distancing ourselves from it. That means immersing ourselves in Jewish learning and not just enrolling our kids and grandkids in it. It means hearing the voice of our prophets imploring us to be a light to all the peoples of the earth. It means displaying the same kind of courage my grandfathers had when they refused to subjugate a part of their identities just to be more readily acceptable to their neighbors, and it means answering Torah's call – repeated some thirty-six times – to care for the strangers in our midst, just as this great nation did for my grandfathers when they arrived on these shores.

If we do so, as proud members of the Jewish community and as proud Americans, we will not only be pushing back against the forces of anti-Semitism in our midst, we will also be answering Yom Kippur's call for us to choose life¹⁰ for ourselves, our neighbors, and for our children and grandchildren as well...

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30:19