

Sermon: The Rise of Antisemitism in the Wake of Gaza

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Avinu Malkeinu.....inscribe us for blessing in the Book of Life.

Avinu Malkeinu.....have compassion upon us.

Avinu Malkeinu.....Kalei Kol Tsar....u'Masteen Mei'Aleinu....Rid us of all sorrows.....of pain.....and **Keep far from us those who would seek us harm.**

For two thousand years, Jewish communities have chanted *Avinu Malkeinu* as a way of summarizing their deepest hopes. Standing before the open ark, the prayer is a plea that a divine decree will somehow ensure goodness in the year to come....and that all sources of sorrow would be removed.

In different lands and during different times, certain lines spoke more deeply to the lives of the people who prayed them. On this Rosh Hashanah.....*Kalei Kol Tsar u'Mastin Mei'Aleinu*.....“Rid us of those whose hatred would rise up against us”....speaks to our souls.

This summer – as we marked the 75th anniversary of the start of World War II – we were shocked to witness a significant rise in global antisemitism – particularly in Europe. Many of the events themselves were cloaked in --- or spilled-over from --- what organizers described as protests against Israel’s invasion of Gaza. However, these acts quickly moved from protest to persecution – clearly crossing the line separating legitimate critique of Israeli government policy and actions of incitement, bigotry, and hatred.

The litany of antisemitic incidents sounds more like something one would read in the pages of a history book. At demonstrations in Germany....chants of “Jews to the Gas!” and “Slaughter the Jews!” echoed in the streetsIn France.....demonstrations led to the throwing of Molotov cocktails at a local synagogue and at a nearby JCC, while scores of Jewish congregants praying at another nearby synagogue had to be rescued from a violent mob. In Argentina, Denmark, France, Germany, South Africa, Spain, and the UK there were incidents of Jewish properties vandalized and daubed with swastikas. In Australia, Chile, the Netherlands, Morocco, and France – a number of Jews who wore *kippot* or anything else identified them as Jews were threatened or assaulted. According to one recent report, 40% of all European Jews now actively conceal their Jewish identity. In Spain – the major Spanish daily, “El Mundo” felt it acceptable to run an editorial that said that ‘Israel’s military operation in Gaza showed why Jews “have been so frequently expelled” from countries.’ And on social media – the hashtags: “Hitlerwasright” and “Hitlerdidnothingwrong” have grown in popularity.

In the US.....during and in the wake of the war in Gaza.....while the rise in antisemitism has been less dramatic, it has, nonetheless been present....with incidents having been reported –

among other places - in California.....Chicago.....New York....and in nearby Lowell, where a synagogue was vandalized.

As Ari Shavit, a senior correspondent for the left-leaning Israeli newspaper, *HaAretz* wrote recently: “(This summer)...all at once....everything broke loose. The masks were removed. The legitimate criticism of the occupation became illegitimate criticism of Israel...became a malignant hatred of the Jews.”

A rabbinic colleague and classmate of mine was raised in London....and is currently living and teaching there. Recently, I reached out to her to ask how she was doing....and to try to gain a more personal perspective on what was happening. She wrote with great humility – sharing that while she could hardly speak for the approximately quarter of a million Jews living in Great Britain she would offer what she could.

She shared that she definitely had clear memories of antisemitism from her years as a child. That while people tended to be polite, there was always a sense that Jews didn’t quite belong. She recalled that on more than a few occasions, kids at school would ask her where her horns were. When she asked her father why they were saying this and how she should respond, her father told her to tell them that she had shaved them off for the summer. She told me: “I think that he was joking.....but I never forgot it.”

She quickly reassured me that, in her opinion, the Jewish community was safe....that there is still the sense that they live in a democracy and are protected by the law and the police. And yet ‘there remains amongst the community an abiding frustration and sense of unease that the events in Gaza appear to have given some Brits the feeling that it is permissible to more publically express their more deeply held antisemitic thoughts and feelings.’

The recent rise in antisemitism around the world has touched a nerve for many reasons. First and foremost....as part of a people with a shared history, tradition, and values....when other Jewish communities....when other Jews experience pain, we experience pain. The Talmud teaches: “*Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh ba-Zeh*” – “All of Israel relies upon – touches upon – each other.”

At the same times....having been taught the values of Torah and the prophets by our parents....our teachers.....and our rabbis....we recognize that every human being – that every soul is created in the divine image. And so when we learn of intolerance and bigotry acted out through word or deed against any people, we recognize our need to respond. Rabbi Hillel, the great sage from the 1st century BCE said it best: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?”

As a people who include the Holocaust as part of our collective memory, we know from personal experience where unchecked antisemitism can lead. For us, a people who lost 40% of our entire community to modern violence born out of ancient hatred – less than a lifetime ago - Auschwitz continues to be a wound that is very much felt. Blessedly, today – in this country - we live comfortably and free – most of us far from the kind of antisemitism currently being experienced in Europe. And so to see masses of angry protestors chanting against Jews....to hear of violent mobs intimidating and attacking Jewish communities because they are Jews....is to have awakened within us a depth of anguish, uncertainty, and concern that such attitudes remain – even in our own day!

As Abraham Joshua Heschel once noted: “The Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation.....with language and propaganda.”

Historically, we know...antisemitism or anti-Judaism has been a pervasive part of the Jewish experience. There is a measure of truth to the borscht belt humor that explains the background of many Jewish holidays as: “They tried to kill us. They failed. Let’s eat.” In the Book of Genesis, such a circumstance is foretold in the original faith promise made by Gd to Abraham:

“Yode’a tei-da, ki ger y’hiyeh zar’acha b’eretz lo lahem....

“Know for certain that your people will become strangers in a land that is not their own and they shall become enslaved and afflicted...”

In the Book of Numbers, the prophet Balaam – upon seeing the encampment of the Children of Israel declares that: “Lo....this is a people destined to dwell alone.”

As well....our Hagaddah reminds us each year that: “*B’chol dor va’dor*.....In every generation there will be those who will rise up against us.”

And whether we read our sacred texts as having been written to reflect historical reality or to foretell it, the suffering endured over the generations by Jews for no-other-reason-except-that-they-were-Jewish has profoundly impacted how we see ourselves and how we see ourselves in relation to others.

Yet, given this reality.....while one might expect Jewish tradition to take a more protective – inward facing – stance, the opposite is true. Our texts and our sages remind us constantly of our responsibilities to not merely see the world as it is, but rather as it ought to be --- to affirm “*Kavod HaBriyot*” – the human dignity of all.

Our call is to strive to become a light unto the nations, not despite the nations. And, in fact, we are called upon to somehow make our experiences of difficulty make us more sensitive and more aware of the needs of others. “Remember,” we are told repeatedly, “that you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.”

One of my most formative experiences growing up took place when I was sixteen. As many of you know, I am a proud graduate of Malden Catholic High School. While Malden, at the time, was home to many Jewish families, there were only five Jewish kids in my graduating class. As I like to say – we used to play “Jews against the Universe” in basketball. (I won’t tell you who won.)

During my years at Malden Catholic, one of the more difficult teachers was a science teacher who happened to be Jewish. A brilliant man and excellent educator, he was known for challenging his students --- sometimes giving grades that were not quite what his students wanted or expected.

One morning, I recall entering the school to find that a number of the walls – as well as the door to this teacher’s classroom – had been spray-painted in black with antisemitic graffiti.....including several swastikas.

More than a bit surprised and confused, I remember my classmates and I waiting through our morning classes to find out what would happen.

How the school leadership – the faculty and administration of Catholic brothers and the sisters – how they responded has stayed with me all these years.

The entire student body and faculty were called for an assembly in the school auditorium. The room was packed – with many standing along the side walls. And one by one.....teachers, heads of school, and then students....made their way to the podium to speak. Their words were all in protest over what had taken place.....a public proclamation that this act of hatred had been an affront to the soul of the school.....and that such attitudes and acts would not be tolerated. Everyone who wanted to speak was given the opportunity to do so. To a sixteen year old Jewish teen....and, I would imagine, for everyone present who watched this unfold.....it was a powerful reaffirmation and reclaiming of the community’s values.

That experience has unquestionably helped to shape my rabbinate and the emphasis I place on interfaith relationship-building and education. We do have the ability to respond when hatred and intolerance arise in our communities – no matter who they are directed against. And – even before something happens – we have the ability to teach....and to learn.....and to act!

It has been heartening during these past weeks – when Jews around the world have been in need - to see the responses of many who have stood up to affirm what is right.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel – speaking to thousands gathered to protest the rise in antisemitism in her country said: “We can see through the perfidious intentions of antisemitism: Jewish people are to be made outsiders in our country. And our response is clear: Jewish friends, neighbors and colleagues – Germany is your home.”

In recent days, similar government condemnations of antisemitism have been heard in France and Italy ---- while our own US House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed House

Resolution 707 vehemently rejecting any attempts to justify anti-Jewish hatred or violent attacks as an acceptable expression of political protest.

Also noteworthy....the Union of Mosques in France – on behalf of their five-hundred mosques – declared that attacks against Jews and Jewish communities are morally unjust and unacceptable.

These words and actions by leaders and governments around the world.....as well as strong gestures like these that we hope will follow in the coming weekswill undoubtedly set a tone that will ultimately determine not only the future of European Jewry....but the nature of European society as a whole.

Looking closer to home.....we can be proud that we have done much in support of our vision to build strong alliances of shared values that lead to meaningful action.....both as a way of responding to bigotry....and as tool to prevent it.

In the Boston Jewish community...we are blessed with an active and engaged Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Community Relations Council, and American Jewish Committee – among others. These organizations do essential work - enabling us as individuals to join them and, in doing so, to amplify our voices for justice locally and globally.

Here in Needham.....Temple Beth Shalom's clergy is proud to be part of a strong and close-knit circle of interfaith leaders that include spiritual leadership from the Catholic, Baptist, Muslim, Baha'i, Unitarian, Quaker, Protestant, and Lutheran communities. Our work together in partnership – and by extension, the strong relationships shared by our congregations are powerful vehicles for developing deeper understanding of each other and of standing against intolerance.

Here at Beth Shalom.....we seek to nurture the Jewish leaders and responsible community members of today and tomorrow. Our interfaith ties are strong. In fact, all of our programs in our congregation – whether for adults or for our children – somehow seek to nurture belonging, inspire growth, and instill social responsibility.

One new effort that is worthy of mention: Thanks to the efforts of our Feldman Outreach program - during the coming year...we will be working with the clergy and leadership of Eastern University – a liberal Protestant University just outside of Philadelphia – to create a special interfaith engagement fellowship for teens. Five high school juniors from TBS will come together with five sophomores from Eastern – both in Boston and in Philadelphia – for several days of shared learning, spiritual exploration, community service, and relationship building.

People are not born with bigotry and intolerance in their hearts.....They learn it. And so, this year especially, the Shofar's call is for us to act:

To deepen our efforts of outreach.

To meaningfully respond when something is done or said.

To join with others who pledge to make their voices heard to confront intolerance and ignorance.

To reach out or to deepen existing relationships with those whose background is different from our own.

This Rosh Hashanah, each of us is called upon to become a “No’sei Or” – “a bearer of divine light” in a world whose darkness – as we know all too well - can sometimes overwhelm us.

May we – as individuals and as families – be inspired to make this mission our own.

Amen.