

10.1.19. Rosh Hashanah, Day 2: Anti-Semitism

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Every year, as part of my preparation for the High Holy Days, I read through the sermons I have given in the past. This ritual gives me the chance to remember what was on my mind and in the mind and heart of the community, and to trace my own evolution. It has become part of my personal Elul practice, and I usually find it comforting. This year, however, I found it jarring.

I had planned on speaking about anti-Semitism long before I opened my files, but I had not realized how many times I already had. This will be my third High Holy Day sermon about rising anti-Semitism in 5 years. Granted, the first two were in a different congregation, but the events and data are the same whether in New York or California. And disturbingly, but not surprisingly, things have gotten worse.

Five years ago, the anti-Semitism we experienced came mostly in the guise of anti-Zionism. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions or BDS movement was getting a lot of press then, and there was some confusion, even in the Jewish community, about whether or not BDS was, in fact, anti-Semitic. It was. It still is.

BDS might masquerade as an activist group, but in reality, it is a hate group that gives license to its followers to hate both Israel and Jews. Back then (all the way back in 2014), it was easier to push off or even ignore BDS because it didn't look like the type of anti-Semitism the world had seen before. Jewish communities knew we needed to provide more Israel education for high school and college students, so that young people would be able to confront BDS on campus, but there didn't seem to be a direct line between the anti-Zionist agenda and recognized anti-Semitism. Again: they are the same.

As Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, "In the Middle Ages Jews were hated for their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, they were hated for their race. Today they are hated for their nation state, Israel." All three types of hate insist on the same thing: "Jews have no right to exist collectively as Jews with the same rights as other human beings."

Anti-Zionism is part of the new face of anti-Semitism, and nowhere is this more apparent than at the United Nations. While recently the UN released a report acknowledging some forms of anti-Semitism, in 2018, the UN issued 21 condemnations against Israel. In the same year, they issued one against Iran, one against Syria, and one against North Korea.

Two years ago, the anti-Semitism in this country became more overt – more chillingly familiar. Two years ago, white supremacists marched through Charlottesville screaming "Jews will not replace us." These neo-Nazis, although I will drop the neo and call them Nazis, carried flags bearing swastikas and marched past the local synagogue shouting "sieg heil." They are responsible for murdering Heather Heyer, injuring 28 people, and inducing fear in the Jewish community.

Do you remember what you were thinking when the Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville? Did you perhaps think, 'oh that's terrifying and if it could happen in that college town it could happen anywhere?' Or did you maybe think, "oh that's terrifying, but it's also Virginia...that's the south. Things are different here." I understand both reactions.

5 months before the march in Charlottesville, I traveled to Whitefish, Montana, with about 100 other Conservative rabbis to support a colleague who had been the target of the alt-right. She was trolled on-line, which included death threats to her children, and a picture of herself with a super-imposed yellow star on her shirt. I will admit to you that even after traveling to Montana and listening to my colleague's stories first-hand, in the back of my mind, I thought to myself – this is terrible, and it is also a tiny town in Montana. This is not New York, or Chicago, or Silicon Valley.

And I will also admit, although not proudly, that I had that thought again after Charlottesville. I had to remind myself that Charlottesville is a liberal college town and that that rally could have taken place just as easily in Cambridge or Palo Alto.

Which brings us to this year. Last October, not even one year ago, 11 people were murdered at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. 11 people who had simply shown up for shul were gunned down for being Jewish. A few months later, a woman was murdered and three more were injured at Chabad in Poway. In July, a man was shot repeatedly while waiting for services to begin at a Young Israel in Miami.

These attacks can happen anywhere, and there is nothing veiled about this anti-Semitism. In 5 years, we have witnessed the move from words to murder. The Holocaust did not begin with gas chambers. It began with words. And this spike in anti-Semitism in our country did not begin with murder; it began with words. And my friends, we have not been paying attention. If it can happen in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, it can happen here. We cannot ignore what is going on all over our country.

On September 10, a 117-year-old synagogue in Duluth was burned to the ground. On September 11, a synagogue in LA was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti; another synagogue in LA was vandalized on September 18. On September 20, a synagogue in Sharon, Massachusetts – home to an enormous Jewish population, was vandalized.

There have been many violent attacks against identifiably Jewish people in Brooklyn over the last several months. A man was beaten with a belt, a rabbi had two teeth knocked out while exercising in a park, a truck driver suffered an eye injury after someone threw a rock through his window.

We can no longer think of these events as “one-offs” somewhere far away, because that is not what this is. It is hard to understand. It is hard to admit. It is scary and unsettling, and we will probably have more questions than answers. We might want to make excuses or wish it away, but this is our reality today. And we must wake up to it.

We have been complacent for far too long. We feel at home here in the United States. We are assimilated and acculturated and integrated into the fabric of American society, which is part of the reason why it is so difficult to comprehend that there are people who hate us because we are Jewish. But there is a lot of hate in our country. It did not start two or three or five years ago; its roots are much deeper.

The difference, as Bari Weiss points out in her book, “How to Fight Anti-Semitism” is:

“Our real fear now, is that the once-marginal haters – the neo-Nazis, the white supremacists, the creeps and loons who celebrated mass killings from behind their iPhone screens – are no longer marginal. They have become the visible exemplars of a new political and cultural style that has overthrown long-standing sets of norms about tolerance, basic decency, and civility. The speech and behavior that had, until recently, been confined to basements and backrooms is now visible on Twitter and cable news.”

A few weeks ago, I participated in an American Jewish Committee Rabbinic conference call on confronting anti-Semitism, with AJC CEO David Harris, and Simone Rodan-Benzaquen, the Director of AJC Europe. Rodan-Benzaquen urged us to use what has been happening in Europe over the last 20 years as a cautionary tale. She reminded us that just this past May, Germany’s anti-Semitism Commissioner warned Jewish men against wearing a kippah in public following a spike in attacks against Jews. And, according to a recent report by France’s National Human Rights Advisory Committee, in 2018 anti-Semitic acts in France increased more than 70% compared to the previous year.

On the call, David Harris cautioned us that anti-Semitism is being used as a political weapon to advance various political goals. He reminded us that what we are experiencing is not an exact replica of the anti-Semitism of the 1930s. There are new elements. Social media is new and it is a disseminator of dark conspiracy theories, and white supremacy. Anti-Zionism is now layered into anti-Semitism. Currently, there are three sources of anti-Semitism – the Far Left, the Far Right, and Radical Islamists, and they are all feeding off of each other.

Harris believes that if we are serious about fighting anti-Semitism, then we must get serious about fighting all three types. “We have an obligation to be swivel-headed,” as he says. “And that means fighting the Far Left, the Far Right, and the Islamist extremist groups, over our own political parties and goals.”

In other words, we must recognize anti-Semitism and call it out, even when it is coming from our own political party. Whether it’s Representative Omar tweeting “It’s all about the benjamins,” President Trump saying, that Jews who vote for Democrats show “either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty,” or several New Jersey council people representing different parties using the term “jew down,” we must speak out when we hear anti-Semitic slurs.

I wish I weren’t painting such a bleak picture of the United States in the 20-teens, and it is my hope although not necessarily my belief that in a few years I’ll look back and learn that I overreacted during this time. But right now, we have a lot of work to do to change our current reality, and, there are steps we can take and things we can do to make a difference. There are some positive reasons why what we are experiencing is not an exact replica of Germany in the 1930s.

First, we have a voice, we have political power – please make sure you register to vote! and we are finally waking up to our reality, so let us not be afraid to use our voice. We must call out anti-Semitism, even when it is uncomfortable, even when we sit from our own party.

Second, we have wonderful neighbors. This past October, 400 people of all faiths gathered at Shir Hadash following the attack in Pittsburgh. Two days later, 600 people gathered at City Hall in San Jose to stand against hate. More than 50 members of clergy representing diverse religious traditions, as well as 18 elected officials came together to support the Jewish community, to

support one another and to state loudly and clearly that an attack on one of us is an attack on us all.

Six months later, after the shooting in Poway, the first message I received was a text from a Muslim woman I met after a group from Beth David went to the West Valley Muslim Association to show support and solidarity after the attacks on the New Zealand mosques. My new friend, texted me the following, “I just heard about this tragic news and am reaching out to you to share my sympathy, sadness and support to you and all my Jewish brothers and sisters. I know I need to increase my prayers asking God for protection against such satanic acts toward peaceful people of faith all around us. If there is anything I can do, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me. Your sister in faith.”

That Sunday morning, two members of West Valley came to the synagogue with flowers and a letter written by several imams and Muslim leaders. They offered hugs, tears, and words of consolation. The next day, I received a personal call from a local Presbyterian minister asking what he and his congregation could do to support us. And the following Shabbat, more than 20 people of various faith traditions showed up and stood outside our synagogue protecting us while we prayed.

These messages of support are exactly why it is so important that we get to know our neighbors, that we establish deep and real relationships with the members of various houses of worship.

We must stand against hate in all of its forms – not just anti-Semitism, but bigotry, racism, and Islamophobia – while it is true that we must call out the anti-Semitism of radical Islamist groups, it is equally true that we must get to know our Muslim neighbors and share in their pain, as we did after the mass shootings in Christchurch. We must stand together against the hatred that pervades our world.

We must do the work now, so that when help is needed, the relationship is already in place. When we get to know each other as human beings, as children of the same God with a different belief system, then when times are really difficult, it isn't us and them, rather, it is simply us, together. Please consider coming to the Unity BBQ at the APJCC during Sukkot, when will be able to spend time with each other.

These relationships are important to foster during times of relative calm and security so they will be strong and healthy during times of disruption. We can accomplish more together than separately.

Third, we live in a world where Israel is a reality. We don’t need to agree with every government policy or even with the government period. We don’t even need to know what the next government will look like, in order to still love Israel. We have a homeland that will take us in if we want to make *aliyah* and if we should need to make *aliyah*. After 2000 years, Israel is not only a spiritual dream, but an actual, physical reality. Israel is strong and Israel makes us strong.

Israel has become a political weapon over the last several years, wielded by both the right and the left, but we need not let it be so. Israel should make us confident and proud to be Jewish and to be Zionists. We, as a Jewish People, have a right to self-determination, and we should not be

embarrassed by it. We must recognize that Israel gives us strength, hope, and yes, protection, even when we disagree with some of its policies.

We must visit and learn about Israel. We must teach young people to love Israel, to travel to Israel, to understand that they are blessed to live in a time when Israel is-real. This is the time to cultivate your personal relationship with Israel, and together as a community, we must nurture our relationship with Israel. In the last year, many people have asked about a Beth David trip to Israel. This feels like an excellent time to go, so if you are serious, please contact me after the holiday.

Finally, we must realize that we are blessed to be part of a synagogue community. Congregation Beth David is family. We turn to family during difficult times. We garner strength and resilience when we come together with people we love, when we raise our voices together, and when we support one another. We don't want to be completely insular, but neither do we want to lose our identity and unique legacy as a Jewish People. We need each other. And we need to be proud of who we are and what we stand for.

Yesterday I spoke about the shofar as our squawky inner cries of discomfort, but the shofar also calls out. It wakes us up and demands not only our attention but our action. On Rosh Hashanah, we sound the shofar 100 times each day. The *shevarim* sound is three wailing cries, while the *teruah* is 9 staccato blasts that sound like someone is sobbing and trying to catch their breath. Weep for the state of our country - cry for the brokenness, for the hatred that is too often and too loudly expressed. But let us not get stuck crying for too long.

Our job - our purpose is to be the *tekiah* - the loud clear sound of standing up and taking responsibility for our world. We must acknowledge the brokenness, and then we must resolve to repair it.

We become the *tekiah* by building relationships based on understanding and respect with people from other faith traditions.

We become the *tekiah* when we strengthen our commitment to and support for Israel.

We become the *tekiah* by being proud members of the Jewish community.

We become the *tekiah* when we say and mean Never Again, not only for us - the Jewish People, but for all who are oppressed.

We become the *tekiah* when we stand up and speak out against hate.

In this new year of 5780, let us become the *tekiah*.

Rise - *Tekiah*