

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Sermon: We are Walking on Lava

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Set up 3-4 ottomans/reserved chairs/pillows; easel (sign on floor)

Shanah tovah.

There is a **children's game** – you may be familiar with it: It is one of those great games that inevitably ends in tears. It's called **"The Floor is Lava."** Have you heard of it? ***Demonstrate with ottomans/reserved chairs*** Basically, at the outset of the game, the players declare, **"The floor is lava"** – and therefore anything – **furniture, thrown pillows, thrown siblings** – become the only means to get from one end of the room to the other.

And like *any good children's game*, this one **has some truth** to it. It's not comfortable to think about – but you know, **just a few miles** beneath us, *right now*, is **one, unending, molten lake of fire**. And all we have is **this ottoman** to protect us, as we walk and drive around, benignly oblivious that, beneath us – **IT'S ALL LAVA**.

Comforting thought, no? Now, we *KNOW* this... but **how often do we THINK** about it? How many of us **[DEMONSTRATE] tip-toe around**, testing the reliability of the crust of the Earth at any given time, *before* we take our next step? Of course, **there are places** on earth where we *know* the lava comes to the surface. We call those **"volcanos"** – and most of us steer clear of them – because they are **dangerous**, and every once in a while, they are incredibly **destructive** – **frequently enough** to keep us scared, **infrequently enough** to keep us **blindly, blissfully ignorant** of their danger, as we go along our daily lives on the crust of the Earth.

[STEP DOWN] Friends, I am *sorry* to be the one to **remind** us: **We are walking on lava**. We have *always* been walking on lava. And so, at this time in our history, we **should not be shocked** and horrified and aghast – that we feel the heat. But it's **not a children's game**. I'm talking about **anti-Semitism**.

Like walking on lava, **anti-Semitism has always existed** – as long as there were Jews. It is a **constant**. We would have **expected** that by now, the world would have said, "NO! This is **not what a civilized world** can tolerate!" But **here we are**, again. That's what I mean, when I remind us that, just below this floor, it's lava. It's **everywhere, latent, easily ignored, dormant, but never extinct**.

And *every time* anti-Semitism rears its ugly head, *especially* after a long period of dormancy, we as Jews have always been **caught unawares**, surprised, lulled into some sense of security because we were settled, we were more Greek than Judean (in the story of Chanukah)... **more Roman** than Judaeen (the destruction of the Temple)... **"in" enough** with the Spanish Court (the Expulsion and Inquisition)... and yes, **more German**, with all our World-War-I German Army medals, than Jewish.

We have *always* walked on lava. And we've *always* been **shocked** when it gets **hot**. I'm no different. If you would have **told me**, over fifteen years ago, that as a **newly-minted rabbi**, I'd *ever* give a sermon on anti-Semitism on the High Holidays, that it would **ever again** in **my career** bubble up to a sense of such **communal urgency** that we'd **lead off** the High Holidays with this topic – I'd have said "you're **crazy**... that's **soooo last-generation-rabbi**." And yet... here we are.

The truth is, I **didn't want to give this sermon**. I have *dozens* of other sermons that are on my "back-burner" of great ideas (with great props and visuals), that I hope to learn with you someday. This is **not** the sermon I was **excited to give** – for **several reasons**: **First**, the **fact** that I *have* to give this sermon *means* that anti-Semitism *has* bubbled up, the **lava** has reached the surface again. **Next**, I'm **not** going to **solve this age-old problem**, no tie-it-up-with-a-bow ending. **Could you imagine** if I did? That would be a **first** for Jewish history: "Remember the High Holidays when the **Rabbi solved anti-Semitism?**" **Not gonna happen**. **Spoiler alert**: There's **not** going to be a **satisfying ending** to this one. I'm **not** going to make you feel **good** and **comfortable**; on the contrary, *without* being **alarmist**, we're going to **uncover** all the reasons we should be **UN-comfortable**. And **finally**, *no matter* your **political** leanings, **equal-opportunity**, **everyone** is going to get to **squirm** a bit – because I believe that this **age-old hatred** has found a **festering breeding ground** on the **right** and the **left**.

This is **not** the sermon I *wanted* to give this year (*or any year*). But **as your Rabbi**, **charged** with **answering** through the **lens of Jewish wisdom** the **pressing questions** of our **Jewish** and **emotional** lives, this is **the one sermon** I could **not not give** this year. Because, by a **show of hands**: **How many** of us here today feel **less secure** in our world this year, compared to last year? (*Keep your hands up...*) After **Pittsburgh's Tree of Life** synagogue massacre? After

some other event? The **conversations** we've had **here at Adath Israel** about **security**, the **changes** we've made and are always re-evaluating for greater (but never 100%) safety? **How many** of us feel **uncertain** of our **security** – **AS JEWS?** Of our security in some other way? For how many of us does the **world feel different** this time 'round the sun? **How many** of us feel **uncertain** that **Europe** is safe for Jews? That, in a **creeping, unnerving way** that we'd **rather not think about** too much, that **America** is a little less secure for Jews – in the **big tragedies** but *also* in the acceptance of **latent attitudes** as **non-exceptional, not fully out-of-bounds?**

Are we **neurotic**? Are we **alarmist**? Are we **fatalistic**? **History** would tell us we're just **prudent**. Yes, it presents like a bit of **PTSD**, every time we hear of a swastika on a cemetery stone or a school locker or anywhere else – there are **plenty** of **past traumas** to justify it.

This is **not** the sermon I **wanted** to give, but it's **the sermon we need** – because of the **number of hands in the air** when I asked if we feel uncertain, insecure. We are being reminded that, *not too far beneath us*, the **floor is lava**. So in the next not-enough minutes **[POSTER]**, I'm going to try to **outline** the problem... describe the current manifestation of this **mutating virus of anti-Semitism**, in light of its **echoes** that stretch back to the time of the Bible – and then, I'm going to reflect on what might be **different** this time – for better *and* for worse.

Right after the Holocaust, **Jean-Paul Sartre** tried to **explain anti-Semitism**. He saw the **Jew** in a **Diaspora** country as the **perennial “other.”** And being “other” can be **useful** to people – especially to people who want to **re-inforce who is “in” or “native.”** All you need to do to make yourself feel **more “French”** is to **ally** with others to **push out** a **different** group by calling them **less “French.”** Classic **middle-school bullying** rules.

So from the **right** and from the **left**, from the **highest echelons** of class and rank to the **rank-and-file** – **anti-Semitism FITS** – because the **Jew**, with our **distinct identities**, customs, history, and faraway **historical homeland** – we are **always more “other.”** It's *never* been different **[POINT TO “HISTORICAL ECHOES”]** – think about it: Almost 2400 years ago, in the **Spring** of (approximately) 362 BCE, a **loyalist** to the Persian King Ahasueros named **Mordechai** was **under a lot of pressure**. Mordechai had previously saved the King's life at his own peril – but was now forced to **defend the Jews' loyalty** to the **Persian government** *without abandoning* our **faith**, or our **yearning** for **Zion**. **Haman (BOO!)** had secured a **royal insignia** on a **decree** to **annihilate** the Jews of Persia. “*Yeshno Am m'fuzar u-meforad bein ha-amim... v'dateihem shonot... v'la-Melech ein shoveh l'hanicham*” – he wrote. “There is a **People** – **different** from **US real Persians**, scattered amongst our nation, with a different religion, **different allegiances** – the Government should not tolerate them.”

Sound familiar? It sounds like the **anti-Semitism** of the **Far-Right** nowadays – **Blood and Soil**, as the white supremacist marchers in Charlottesville chanted - **our heritage, we** are the **true Americans**, we **cannot tolerate the Other-ness** of the Jews, nor of other peoples and races and ethnicities and origins who, alongside Jews, are defined as more “**outside,**” less **Persian, less American**.

And **before anyone** gets comfortable: 3300 years ago, in the Spring of (approximately) 1313 BCE, **Moses** was **under a lot of pressure**. Pharaoh had **sold the Egyptian people** on the **Other-ness of the Jews** as well, by saying, “*Hava nitchachma lo* – let us **outmaneuver** the Jews of Egypt, for their **loyalty to Egypt** is in question. They **cannot be trusted** as **real Egyptians**.” Or in other words, words that made headlines this year: “**Jews may harbor allegiance to a foreign country.**”

Our **loyalty questioned** – from the **left** – the words of Representative Omar and others... and from the **right**, from President Trump. Can we be **both Jewish and American**? Or do we **betray one** with our **pride** and **fidelity** to the **other**? It's a **classic anti-Semitic trope**. It's what, according to Sartre, emboldens people to define us as “**OUTSIDE**” the society, “**OTHER.**” That is **anti-Semitism**. **[HANDS]** **How many** of us have felt **insecure, uncertain, challenged, marginalized** in this way, over the past year?

Have we **spoken out** – *regardless* of whether the source of the anti-Semitism is in the **political camp** we hold dear? Sadly, the **tepid**, equivocating, tentative response *even* of the Jewish community would suggest otherwise. Are we **under pressure** once again, like Mordechai and Moses?

Are we **allying with others** who have *also* been **marginalized** and **oppressed**? With the pain of recent anti-Semitic comments, that is also why we must **reject hatred** and **prejudice** of any kind, including **racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and homophobia** – *right alongside* our rejection of anti-Semitism? Have we sought such **solidarity**?

It is **true** – **this time ‘round**, we as Jews have been **pushed away, rejected** from such **commonality** of cause, **spurned** by those with whom we would **commiserate** as fellow victims of hatred.

Sadly, some who claim to be “**woke**” – have decided that *their* narrative of oppression requires a **rejection** of *our* narrative of oppression. That *ours* was **too long ago** – “**get over it,**” they’ve said. That we are “**too white**” to **understand** historical pain. Or on the **other side** of the spectrum, that we will *never* be “**white enough.**” Either way, it’s **racist** and **disgusting** – not to mention that it **erases Jews of color** from the picture. I spoke here a few years ago, about how **sad** I was that **Jewish solidarity** was **ejected** from the **Black Lives Platform** – and how **different** that was from the **legacy** of **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** and **Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel**, marching arm in arm, in common cause.

A little over a year ago, I was **desperate**, and then **disappointed**, when the President did *not* say to the marchers in Charlottesville, “**Yes, you have always been here, the lava is always underfoot** – but for most of our history you have been **relegated** to the **dark places** of our society. **Go back to your ugly holes** and stay there.” I was also **desperate**, and **disappointed**, when Congress could *not* see fit to **unequivocally** call out the **anti-Semitism** of its members, language of “it’s **all about the Benjamins,**” or **questions of loyalty** on *that* side of the spectrum. *No matter* my political leanings, which I will *not* share with you – I **felt less secure, less reassured** that for the first time in Jewish history, **America would be different, immune** from anti-Semitism.

I tell you, I *desperately* wanted to believe that, that there was **no more lava underfoot**. You know the short version of **every Jewish holiday?** (**They tried to get us... they didn’t... let’s eat**) - ? I *desperately* wanted to believe that we could **go straight to the party, to the food....** But history belies this hope: After **Egypt’s slavery** and oppression (told at **Pesach**)... **Persia’s attempted genocide** (**Purim**)... **Greece’s desecration of our holy sites** and violation of freedom of worship (**Chanukah**)... **Rome’s brutal destruction of the Temple** and wiping out of even the most far-flung Jewish communities in Judaea (**Tisha b’Av**)... **Spain’s Expulsion and Inquisition, Nazi Germany’s Shoah, the Soviet Union’s Refusenik policies, white supremacism and modern-day terrorism domestic and Islamism in the Middle East** – **DAYYENU!**

Prophetically, the early Zionist **Ze’ev Jabotinsky** warned in 1938 that Polish Jews were “**living on the edge of a volcano.**” **Being a Jew** means **being a student of history**. *If only* it were history, and *not* all-too-recent **memory**. Every time it feels like it’s about to fade, every time we get comfortable – we are **reminded: The floor is lava.** On these Days of Awe, we are asked to be painfully aware that our **lives lie in balance**, and our **actions, our choices, affect our life and death** – *if not* as individuals, then *certainly* as a collective whole. We *cannot* allow our **differences**, our bickering and disagreements, to obscure that reality. We *cannot* remain **blissfully unaware** of our **history** – like a person who **claims he wasn’t sick** until he went to the doctor, who diagnosed him.

Malcolm Hoenlein, Executive of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, recently pointed out that **each** of those **stories, the worst anti-Semitic persecutions** over the **past four thousand years**, came in the **historical context** of the **decline of a once-great empire** – think about it: **Egypt’s** empire after Rameses the Third was divided and almost bankrupt, within a century of the approximate date of the Exodus, after 3000 years; the **Persian Empire** fell to Alexander the Great within a few decades after the Purim story; the **Greeks** fell to the Romans eighteen years after the Chanukah story; the **Spanish Armada** failed within a few decades of the Inquisition; and the Decline of the **Third Reich** and the **Former Soviet Union** as well...

As Malcolm Hoenlein reflects, we have always been the “**canary in the coal mine**” for the decline of a once-great nation. I’m *not* saying the **persecution** of the Jews *caused* this decline – we are more likely a **symptom**: As nations **more desperately cling, with nostalgia, to their once-greatness**, as their **borders and influence contract**, they **define more narrowly** what is authentically **THEIRS** – and they **blame everything outside** of that, **everything “other”** – and *that* “**other**” has always been **US** as Jews.

That **should sound terrifyingly familiar** – on **both** the **right** and the **left**: How many of us **lament a sense of decay** in our society? A **divisiveness**, or an **instability**, of what **feels authentically American**, and **what makes us proud** of that? A sense of **urgency**, or *worse*, of **fatalism**? Questions of the **decline of American pre-eminence?**... Feelings of **insecurity, vulnerability** (our elections, our brokering of peace, our influence, how decisive **WAS** our Cold War

victory?... Questioning our wealth, our trade, our former greatness, our future greatness)? In *that* historical context – **terrifyingly, anti-Semitism FITS.**

And it fits on **both extremes** of the **political** and **social** spectrum: We live in a time of **great division** – and the **far-right** and **far-left** are **coming together** like a **visa** on this one point of agreement – **questions of Jewish loyalty, Jewish other-ness.**

I wish it were different. But this lava has always been **just beneath** the surface. And *once again*, it has reared its ugly head. But there *IS* something **different** this time ‘round: When Malcolm Hoenlein called us the **canary in the coal mine**, though, he quipped, “**I don’t want to be the canary** anymore.” The canary, in that saying, is the **first to go**. And **[POINT] THAT’S** a **difference**, this time: Because **unlike in Purim or Pesach, certainly unlike in the Shoah or Soviet Jewry** – this time, **we’re STRONG**. It’s *not* that the **world has changed** from seventy years ago, with the Shoah; it’s that **WE have changed**.

This time, Jews in America are **organized** and **strong** in a way that is unprecedented, yes – AND this time, we have **Israel** as a **source of strength** – military and emotional. That is a **game-changer**. It has also been **falsely accused** as the **justification** for hatred of the Jews – but that is **false**, a **modern-day blood libel**. It is **false** because the lava has **always** been there, it has always found its false justification.... And it is **false** because **criticizing Israel’s policies** is not itself anti-Semitism; it is **democracy**. We are **allowed** – we are encouraged – to **dislike and disagree** with our government. I remember my high-school US History teacher, **Mr. Wemple**, told us that he **grew up** thinking that **President Roosevelt’s** first name was “**That damned**” – as in, “**That Damned Roosevelt** is ruining us...” That’s **democracy**.

Indeed, the people who **most frequently criticize** the government of Israel are **ISRAELIS**. **Israelis** are **tough** on their **government** – because they **uniquely understand** the **stakes**, they must **live** and **defend** under **constant threat** that **far predates** the 1967 or even the 1948 armistice borders. **We must respect** that, **before** we **criticize** from the **comfort** of our **diaspora armchairs**.

However, using that as a **pretext** – to **SINGLE OUT** the **ONE Jewish State** for **criticism** or **ostracism** or **boycott, divestment** and **sanctions** – **THAT** is **anti-Semitism**... To **deny historical and religious claims** through **revisionism** – claims that **yes**, must be **navigated** with **other peoples’** **generational claims**, but nonetheless to **deny Jewish connection** to **this Land** – **THAT** is **anti-Semitism**... To **undo the history of persecution and genocide** against which **Israel** is the **only guarantor** – **THAT** is **anti-Semitism**. To **place the blame** for **ongoing strife** in the land on **one side**, the side of the **only Jewish State** – **THAT** is **anti-Semitism**.

Zionism first appears in the **beginning** of our **Jewish story**, with **Abraham**, and **Israel** is **inextricable** from our **Jewish story**. **IF** we **took Israel out** of the Torah, **hagbahah** – lifting the Torah – would be really easy; there would **not** be too much of the **Torah** left! So **anyone** who would **expect** us as **Jews** to **remove our claim and connection** to our homeland – **THAT** is **anti-Semitism**.

As **Rabbi Jonathan Saks** describes it, **anti-Zionism** is just the latest form of the **mutating virus** that is anti-Semitism: Anti-Semitism **HAS** been about **religion**, about **culture**, about **race**, about **money-lending**, about **nativism** versus **other-ness**... and **now** it’s about **Jewish power** and **self-determination** in our **ancestral homeland**. We *cannot* be the **hated “other”** in a Land that is **OURS**...

We are **now strong** – and **yes**, **people hate us** for that. But **remember** – the **floor is lava**; the hatred has **never gone away**. **Maybe** being **strong** means being **less loved**. But **does our history** promote the **narrative** that **being weak** means **being MORE loved**?! For those centuries of “**may God keep the Czar... far, far away**” – when we **kept our heads down** and **weathered the storm** of the next pogrom or Aktion or deportation or liquidation or expulsion or inquisition?! Did **being weak** make us **more loved**? **NO!**

And so **THAT** is what we must do: **Just like Moses** was under a lot of pressure when **Pharaoh** accused us of **dual loyalties**... **Just like Mordechai** was under a lot of pressure when **Haman (BOO!)** called us out as “**different**” and “**other**” and “**not really Persian enough**” - we must **decide** that **being strong yes**, comes with a **cost**. **Herzl** knew that. **Ben Gurion** knew that. **Ben Gurion** said, “We’ll know we are a normal country when **Jewish thieves** and **Jewish prostitutes** conduct their business in **Hebrew**.” The **State of Israel**, the **source** of that strength, is **not perfect** – but it’s **no less perfect** than **any other nation striving** to be better. It is **more perfect, because** it strives, **because** its army

has a **religious code** of conduct, *because* it is the **beginning flowering of redemption** – *not there yet*, but *at least* we're **striving**. And if *anyone* **ignores** that, or **delegitimizes** that, or **erases** that – **THAT** is **anti-Semitism**.

So **what should we do?** We must **embrace our strength**.... We must **call out anti-Semitism**, *even and especially* when it is **not politically advantageous** for us to do so... We must **stay strong** – knowing that often, when we **refuse** to **allow the lava to surface**, when we **push it down** beneath the surface, into its **ugly holes** – the **strength** that we **need** to do that may cause it to **pressurize**, and become **more explosive**. We *may be* on the **edge** of the **next volcano** – but **strength** is **better** than **passivity** or **weakness**. **Living in a time of strength and self-determination** here in the United States and in Israel **IS** a **choice for strength over passivity**. For the **first time** in two thousand years, we are **not the victims of history**. We are the **authors of history**.

That is what is **different** this time – we are **strong**. But that should **not** make us **over-confident**; it should **not** once again **lull** us into some **false sense of security** – for **two reasons**: **First**, the **strength comes with a price**: Every year, on the **day before** we **celebrate that strength** with Yom Ha-Atzma'ut, Israel's Independence Day, the day before is **Yom Ha-Zikaron**, Israel's Memorial Day, which reminds us the **cost of having the strength** embodied in a Jewish State. But **one week before that**, every year, is **Yom HaShoah**, remembering the Holocaust. If **Israel's Memorial Day** reminds us of the **cost of having a Jewish State**, then **Yom HaShoah** reminds us of the **cost of not having a Jewish State**.

And the **other reason** we should **not** be too confident: **What if** the **last seventy years** since the Holocaust made **anti-Semitism taboo, uncool, outmoded** – **What if** **THAT** is the **"blip"** in history? **What if** **this recent uptick** in anti-Semitism is a **return** to the **base-line, typical, historical reality**?

And **worse**: While anti-Semitism is **not** our fault, **OUR RESPONSE** to this uptick in anti-Semitism may be our downfall. It *used to be* that **Jew-hatred UNITED** us – that's the story of **Chanukah**, when everyone thought the Maccabees were **crazy**, until the Greeks **persecuted us all enough** to bind us together under pressure. Now, *instead* of **UNITING** against anti-Semitism, our adversaries have **DIVIDED** us – as we **explain away** and **forgive** the **hateful speech** and **actions** of those of **our own political leanings** (*whichever that may be*).

The **only other time** I can think of when **anti-Semitism divided us** was the **sectarianism** that led up to the destruction of the Temple. It led to an **almost two-thousand-year exile**, capped off by the Shoah. Because **when the lava creeps out, or erupts**, we have **two options**: Faced with anti-Semitism on all sides, we can **TURN AGAINST** one another, and become a **Pompeii** – a **civilization destroyed**, to be later picked apart by archaeologists... Or we can **UNITE, respond** to the **reality** of the lava, and become a **Hawaii**, a **beauty blossoming from the ashes**. The lava can create either one.

It is a **terrible mistake**, in a time of dormancy, to **forget** that the **lava exists**, and that it is **bubbling up**. As Jews, we **must not cower**; we must show **pride** and **strength**, and **lean IN** to our **Judaism** and our **identity** as a Jewish People. We **must stand together** against the **common enemy** of **anti-Semitism**, coming at us from its **extremely uncommon sides**, both the **right** and **left**. We **must embrace** our **newfound strength**. We **must seize** our **own narrative**, as **actors in our own history, our own destiny** as Jews, **empowered** by the existence of the **strongest Jewish People** in our history – **ever**. If we *don't* **stand up** to **anti-Semitism on ALL sides** – then we have **betrayed** the **Mordechais** and the **Moseses** and the **Maccabees** and the **Ben-Gurions** of our history. If the **Purim** and **Passover** and **Chanukah** stories are all **"They tried to kill us, they didn't, let's eat"** – then **OUR story** is: **"The lava has always been there. They've always tried to kill us or demean us or persecute us or marginalize us. But NOW, despite all our differences, we're strong enough to stop that before they can even try."**

As I said at the outset, I **wish** I could **solve** this problem, **tie it up** in a bow, in a way that made us all feel **safer**, more **comfortable**. I **cannot**. But we **CAN strengthen** one another, we **CAN** call out hatred, and we **CAN** take **pride** in our **long, miraculous history** as a people. The **history** we know; but as we face this **age-old, historical hatred**, we must **never** take our **future** for **granted**. Faced **once again** with the **threats** that **gave rise** to so many of our holidays, I **pray** that as a **People**, we **stand strong, together** – so that we may **celebrate** many **joyous holidays** and *simchas* to come. *Keyn yehi ratzon* – So may it be God's will. And let us say: **AMEN**.