

Rabbi Andrea L. Merow, Rosh Hashana 5780 – 2019- Less Oy, More Joy

As someone who was raised in the later half of the last century there were two things that I did not think I would ever see. Measles, and a surge of anti-Semitism in the United States, and yet, here we are.

Two stories: Roxann L. Bentz is the Nurse Coordinator for the Bucks County Department of Health and writes for the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's website. A recent outbreak of measles meant that her staff was consumed with coordinating a response and protecting the public from disease spread. There were calls to every school, public building, hospitals, doctors, the State, and anxious individuals waiting to learn if they had been exposed. In her words, "this led to a complete disruption to the regular operation of the health department." The upheaval and inconvenience caused by the outbreak was extremely time consuming and took valuable hours away from a workload that continued to need their attention. She concludes, "In this day and age, when we have a measles vaccine, this outbreak didn't have to happen." (CHOP blog)

Our second story occurred on October 27th of last year. On that day things changed for the American Jewish community, when an American brutally attacked Jews who were gathered in a synagogue on Shabbat. He massacred 11 Jews at a shul in Pittsburg; the incident shook much of America. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette printed the Mourners Kaddish, in Aramaic, as its headline. We mourn those 11 lives. We mourn the loss of a sense of security. Our non-Jewish brothers and sisters mourn with us. Many noted a concert in Las Vegas, a night club in Florida, as other recent incidents of hatred actualized. The Jewish community knew that walking into shul to murder Jews may have the last name of hatred, but its first name is Anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is under the umbrella of hatred, but it is a plague unto itself. A few months later it happened again in California.

We thought we had eradicated measles, but we needed parents to inoculate their children. We now know, if ever we doubted it, that anti-Semitism had also been lurking, all this time, just under the surface of parts of our society.

If we watched life in America over the last years, we know that the rise in antisemitism percolated up from other areas of American society last year. The Anti-Defamation League notes that the Pittsburgh massacre was one of 39 reported physical assaults in 2018, a **105%** increase over 2017, much of it perpetrated by known white supremacists.

Earlier this month, the Trenton City council chair was quoted in a work meeting using the term, "Jew her down." Equally troubling were her two fellow council people who tried to defend her saying to "Jew someone down" is just a verb. To be fair, Trenton's mayor begged these people to apologize.

Between measles and Anti-Semitism, one of these is much easier to ameliorate. If we want to eradicate measles, we are fortunate that scientists created vaccines against this plague. Now, the health department must educate the public so that all will decide to get their children vaccinated. But what is the vaccine for the rise in anti-Semitism? How do we inoculate others from destructive tropes and devastating violence against us? How do we educate others and advocate for our People not being scapegoated as the “other” in society?

(Our community considered this yesterday and will continue to think about it.)

We need two types of inoculation. The first is against anti-Semitism itself, the second is the vaccine needed for the Jewish community, one that will help keep our community free from fear, proud and strong, and focused on joyful Jewish living.

Like Roxanne from the Health Department noted above, dealing with an epidemic took her and her colleagues away from their other critical work. Similarly, when we Jews must spend time and funds fighting anti-Semitism, we become distanced from our core mission as Jews – to create holy community, filled with creative Jewish living.

How do we help our community and Jewish life from descending into a place of sadness and pessimism; fear and insular thinking. Expanding on the concept of noted Holocaust historian, Dr. Deborah Lipstadt asks can we choose to nurture our Jewish identity less on *oy*, and more on joy.

Lipstadt’s recent book, *Anti-Semitism Here and Now* offers wisdom on how to combat this plague. As a historian of the Holocaust, she does not make exact comparisons between historical periods; she DOES look to the past, for clues on how to prevent atrocities in the future. It all begins with language. She writes, “genocide begins with words and not with acts of violence.” But these words are often the precursors to violence, and that is why the incident in Trenton is so troubling.

It is crucial for us to monitor language about Jews in the public square and in private conversations. In the world of keeping buildings secure we know that if you see something amiss, you say something. If you hear something amiss, say something as well. The fact that we have the liberty of free speech in our country does not mean that we aren’t obligated to call out and to report hate speech.

And the serum against antisemitism cannot only be about Jews. We must also call out those who display hatred of other groups. Lipstadt writes, “Antisemitism flourishes in a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities. When expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups. Like a fire set by an arsonist, passionate hatred reaches well beyond its intended target.” Fighting against antisemitism means protecting others who are persecuted, even if they may not be perceived to be our friends.

We also combat anti-Semitism through legal action. You remember in 2016 when two white supremacists threatened Jewish families with violence in Whitefish, Montana. You might remember that I visited my colleague there and led a healing service. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a center that fights hate, teaches tolerance, and seeks justice, took that case against the creator of the neo Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* to the courts on behalf of the Jewish victim; this year they won a very large judgement. Successful prosecutions matter. Crafting anti-hate legislation matters.

Hate speech against Jews, hatred against others, shootings at shuls – that is a lot of oy to be concerned with, and for some Jews, part or all of their identity is based mostly around the “oy’s” of Jewish life AND based on the idea that as Jews we will always be seen as the “other” and not in a good way, even in Western society.

We hold a religious philosophy that we as a People are religiously “other.” We want to be a light unto nations, but we do not want to be persecuted for our differences. Early Zionists wondered if the American or Zionist Experience might show that we can be religiously different, but also seen as normal in a Western, secular democracy. We have learned that the answer is no, and yes.

Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, from the Hartman Institute, coined the term Judeao-pessimists - referring to Jews who believe that we will never escape being considered negatively as the “other.” Their kiddush cup is always half empty, and they believe there are always people out to get us.

Even if there may be an existential truth in this world view, I suggest that this is certainly not the kind of Jewish life we want to live, or to pass on to the next generation. I want Judaism with cheer, not with fear. I want more joy than oy.

Lipstadt writes, “Most Jews will immediately step forward when Jews anywhere are being attacked. This is of course as it should be. What is regrettable, however, is that for some Jews, the fight against antisemitism becomes the sum of their Jewish identity. They have been taught to see themselves mainly as perennial victims. This cedes to the oppressor control over one’s destiny.”

A friend of mine describes the education she received in Hebrew school in the late 70s as going from The Destruction of The Second Temple, to the Spanish Inquisition, pogroms and finally the Holocaust. No wonder many Jews raised during that time period backed away from Jewish identity. Missing from the curriculum were: love of Shabbat, holidays and culture. When she educated her own children she made sure they studied the tragedies, but she also made sure that the **focus** of their Jewish life was joyful: family and shul celebrations, fluency in Hebrew and in our Traditions, culture, ethics, philosophy AND how as a people we triumphed over many difficulties. That is our kiddush cup half full or more, that is, making the choice to be a Judeao-optimist - about antisemitism, our survival, or even about our own Jewish community.

The Judeo-optimist knows that even with challenges, we are still here, and we will continue to thrive as a People. Am Yisrael Chai.

We can combat antisemitism, and we can also remember the mayor of Trenton demanded an apology. We can remember the lone shooter in Pittsburgh, and we can take solace in the hundreds of thousands of Americans who came to mourn with us. We can take pride in services of comfort that our community created and that were attended by people of all religions. We can focus on combatting hate, but at the same time we can focus more energy on the sacred and holy mission of our people.

Eskimos have lots of words for snow, Jews have a plethora of words for joy. The focus, and the most critical representation of Jewish values is *always* found in the words of the *Amidah* – the 3 times a day central prayer in Jewish life.

The three paragraphs in the High Holiday *Amidah* that begin with the word *U've'chen*, and so, teach us to live Judaism with joy in our hearts. We pray for the ability to wholeheartedly do God's will. The next paragraphs tell us what it means to have a full heart. Then we pray the words *simcha* - joy, *sasson* - joy, *v'yishmechu* – we shall be joyful, *gila* – joy, *rina* – joy. The prayer concludes, “and all wickedness will disappear.” Our rabbis are teaching that when we as a people live with deep and abiding joy, it will be our joy, and our actions, that remove the influences of wickedness from our lives. Our joyful Jewish living helps us to overcome wickedness.

Living Judaism in a joyful way may also combat anti-Semitism: This year Eli Saslow published an important book called *Rising Out of Hatred - the awakening of a former white nationalist*. It is a biography of Derek Black, who was raised in a notorious white supremacist family. His father founded the Daily Stormer website. A dedicated white supremacist and anti-Semite, as a teen he even hosted his own hate mongering radio show. He was heir to the throne of white supremacy in the US. Then he went to college and found himself dating a Jewish woman for a bit. Then, he was outed on campus as a leader in the hate movement and vilified. His only friends were a group of Jewish young men who consistently invited him to Shabbat dinner each week, for several years. They believed that their interactions with Dereck could change him; and they did. In 2013 Black credits their friendships, and those Shabbat dinners, with helping him to publicly denounce his family and repudiate all his former beliefs. Personal relationships and the joy of a Shabbat table helped to conquer oy.

In 1974, after the trauma of the '73 Yom Kippur War, noted Israeli philosopher Rabbi David Hartman wrote an essay entitled “Auschwitz or Sinai”. He asks, “Will we build our society as a response to the trauma of the Holocaust, or as a way to uplift the sacred covenant that God made with our People at Sinai?” He acknowledges the great traumas of Jewish history, but believes that we should **build** the Jewish State, and I add, we should build our Jewish identity, not based on our tragedies, but on the Covenant that God and the Jewish people forged at Sinai, the Covenant to be a holy people who practice joyful Jewish living, the Covenant that we are each part of.

Hartman writes, “The model of Sinai awakens the Jewish people to the awesome responsibility of becoming a holy people. At Sinai, we discover who we are by what we do.”

The response of the Jewish people after receiving the Torah at Sinai is “na’aseh v’nishma,” we will do Jewish – and then we will understand our sacred connections to God, to each other, to all of humanity.

I want you to be at Sinai with me. Be a Sinai Jew. Seek joy in our Tradition and in God’s beautiful world. Do Judaism, as opposed to defending Judaism– do mitzvas – feel *simcha shel mitzva* – the joy of doing mitzvot, learn Torah here, take classes, engage in volunteer activities here that help to fix the world, or that help someone in need, learn Hebrew, or Jewish culture. Come to minyan, celebrate Shabbat. Choose the Judaism of Joy. Acknowledge the oys of antisemitism, but prioritize meaningful, active Jewish life. **Elevate joy, not oy. Emphasize cheer, not fear.**

I hope to see you in a Sukkah, or back here in two weeks, dancing on Simhat Torah.

As Rebbe Nachman taught, it is a great mitzva to live in the world with joy. *Mitzva gedola l’hiyot b’simcha.*

