

ANTISEMITISM – PART ONE

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This summer, I saw the Yiddish production of “Fiddler on the Roof,” and it was excellent. After Tevye struck a bargain with Leyzer the butcher, the Russian constable told Tevye to beware, that soon there will be “a little unofficial demonstration” – in other words, a minor pogrom. Sure enough, it happened at Tzeitel and Motl’s wedding reception.

I watched this sad scene and couldn’t help but wish we had advance warning of an attack. But then again, maybe we have. Perhaps the chilling shouts of white supremacists in Charlottesville in 2017 – Jews will not replace us – was a foreshadowing of Pittsburgh and of Poway. Pittsburgh was particularly shocking in that eleven innocents were gunned down, murdered just for going to services.

Antisemitism is on the rise in our country. In 2017, 58.1% of all religion-based hate crimes were carried out against Jews.

Tonight, I want to discuss this alarming phenomenon, and tomorrow we will focus on how to respond. A new book, entitled, Anitsemittism Here and Now, by Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University, will help us to make sense of this crisis.

What is antisemitism? Both writers cite the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition, adopted by the U.S. Department of State and thirty other nations and entities.

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals ... toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” It might include the targeting of the state of Israel ... However, criticism of Israel like that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.

Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity, and it is often used to blame Jews for “why things go

wrong.” It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms and action, and employs sinister stereotypes and negative character traits.

Lipstadt states that it is difficult to respond to antisemitism because it is an irrational conspiracy theory, claiming that Jews nefariously control financial markets and politics worldwide. If you provide clear evidence that this is preposterous, then you are part of the Jews’ wicked plot. At the same time, Jews are intellectually and even genetically inferior. For Dr. Lipstadt, “antisemitism is a delusional form of hatred. It conjures a malign image of the Jew that does not in fact exist, then proceeds to find it everywhere.” (p. 240)

This view exists in the Arab world. A few years ago, MJC hosted an Egyptian activist named Hussein Aboubakr Mansour. Hussein developed an interest in Jewish culture which he studied in college. In part for this he was arrested by authorities and jailed for a year. As a child Hussein was taught that Egyptian Muslims are better than other Muslims, and that Jews are pure evil. This attitude was everywhere: in schools, in the workplace, and certainly in mosques. Hussein told us that in 2002 there

was a TV series called *Horseman Without a Horse* that aired during Ramadan. Its theme was the Zionist conspiracy to control the world; the star and co-writer stated that “Zionism has controlled the world since the dawn of history.” The New York Times estimated that tens of millions watched the show.

This irrational belief is the root of the three major sources of antisemitism: white supremacists on the right; supporters of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions, or BDS, movement against Israel on the left, and; radical Islamists. These last two are linked – Muslim extremists support the BDS campaign worldwide, including in America. To be clear, I am not claiming that we should despise Muslims or Christians, God forbid. Rather, we should be wary of anyone who subscribes to antisemitic beliefs.

Those who embrace white supremacy, such as neo-Nazis, vow to restore whites to their rightful place of dominance. They use websites like Gab and 8chan to spread hate. The Pittsburgh shooter, Robert Bowers, posted, “There is no #MAGA as long

as there is a kike infestation ... Open your eyes! The filthy evil Jews bringing the filthy evil Muslims into the country ... I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." These people abhor anyone unlike them. In the 2017 study I mentioned, almost 20% of religion-based hate crimes were carried out against Muslims, often by those who think in these extreme terms.

On the political left, Dr. Lipstadt notes that if you read the founding documents of the BDS movement and listen to the statements of its founders, you will find that its true objective is the dissolution of Israel as a Jewish state. Some adherents hope that BDS' pressure will convince Israel's leaders to alter certain policies. Many in this movement, however, argue that Zionism is a form of racism, a critique leveled on college campuses. This has led to confusion among students about Judaism and about Israel. Further, a growing number of Jewish students are less willing or even afraid to openly celebrate their faith or to support Israel. Finally, and sadly, absolute opposition of Israel has become part of the platform of some progressive causes.

But Zionism is not racism, rather it is the right of Jews to have a national home, or to return to *our* national home. The United Nations recognized Israel's creation in 1947, and to call for its dissolution is outrageous. It is one thing to protest some of a government's policies – that is the sign of a healthy democracy. In fact, many *Israelis* vehemently disagree with certain aspects of their government's actions on treatment of non-Jews, land rights, and more. But to single out the Jewish State for human rights violations, for example, when dozens of nations are guilty of much worse, points to a double standard and is a sign of antisemitism. As Harvard Professor Steven Pinker wrote, “Why no boycotts ... of China, Russia, India, or Pakistan ... which have also been embroiled in occupations and violent conflicts and which, unlike Israel, face no existential threat or enemies with genocidal threats in their charters?” (Lipstadt, pp.179-180)

Some expressions of antisemitism are more subtle. Lipstadt describes the “Dinner Party anti-Semite”, who will claim not to be one because she has Jewish friends or relatives. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, for instance, recently said at Cambridge

University that he has, “some Jewish friends ... They are not like other Jews, that’s why they are my friends.” He has made other antisemitic comments in the past, yet he was invited to speak at Columbia University two weeks ago. When challenged about his past antisemitic statements, he argued, “I am exercising my right to free speech. Why is it that I can’t say something against the Jews?” Could anyone say the same thing about another minority – African Americans, homosexuals – and not be viewed as an extremist? Again, this is a double standard.

Another type is the “Clueless anti-Semite”, such as a woman who turns to her Jewish friend saying, “Did you hear about this sale? Could we go together? I’m sure you’ll know a good bargain when you see one.”

Something similar happened to me. I went to the University of Michigan (Go Blue!) and sang in the Men’s Glee Club. While on a tour of the Far East in 1989, a few of the guys and I were shopping in an open-air market. I was looking at a piece of

jewelry and a friend said to me, “Hey Mike, try to Jew him down.” I was shocked – I had never heard that expression! He was an intelligent and warm-hearted person, but not Jewish. There were no Jews in his community growing up, where “Jew down” was a common phrase.

This phrase is still used. The city council president of Trenton was [recorded](#) using the phrase “jew her down” in a private meeting [last month](#). Kathy McBride had been describing the city attorney’s efforts to [negotiate](#) a lower settlement in a lawsuit. **“They were able to wait her out and jew her down,”** said McBride on the recording. She since apologized.

Our ancestors blew the shofar as a warning of trouble ahead. May we hear the shofar blasts not only to inspire us for the new year, but to prepare us to respond to challenges. Tomorrow, I’ll discuss effective responses to antisemitism.