

Responses to Antisemitism

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Last night we began a conversation about the rise of antisemitism in the U.S. This morning, I'll speak about our response.

The novelist Dara Horn divided antisemitism into two types, based on the stories of two Jewish holidays. The first kind is that of Purim, whose villain Haman sought to murder every single Jew. Such villains still exist, from Hitler, to Iranian leaders and their proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah, who vow to wipe Israel off the face of the Earth and urge their adherents to kill all Jews.

Yes, absolutely we must protect ourselves. After Pittsburgh, here at MJC we enhanced our security, perhaps most visibly by hiring a police officer for every Shabbat service and major event, and for the Chai Building when the Preschool or Hebrew School is in session, and for youth events. I am grateful to everyone here for

supporting this initiative because we deserve to feel safe in our spiritual home. The new ticket and required photo ID together are another security upgrade.

When we gathered for our vigil, the Monday night after Pittsburgh, Mayor Hornik said that here in Marlboro there is a zero-tolerance policy for all types of discriminatory behavior, including Islamophobia. He mentioned the swastikas painted on the tree across from MJC last Yom Kippur, and increased security at all synagogues. The MTPD provides free security assessments to all temples and schools, monitors social media and acts on all threats.

All of this is important, but it's not enough. The second type of antisemitism is that of Antiochus, the villain of Hanukkah, who demanded that Jews disavow their Jewishness. Of course, we will protect our Jewish bodies, but how will we safeguard our Jewish souls? Dara Horn, and Deborah Lipstadt who I cited last night,

assert that we must hold fast to our traditions and to our faith.
This is the key to our longevity, 4,000 years strong!

At the vigil we sang a song based on the teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav. "The world is a narrow bridge, but the key is not to be afraid." *Kol haolam kulo, gesher tzar meod, vhaikar lo lefached klal.*"

I remember one time I was afraid to say I was Jewish. I had been accepted to Rabbinical School, and the program started in Los Angeles. So, Natalie, my girlfriend at the time, and I drove from Michigan to L.A. in a Geo Metro. It was the summer of 1993 and I was 23 years old. I was a new car owner and my father taught me that at 3,000 miles you had to change the oil. I waited until the odometer read 3,000 miles – we were in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Natalie was not impressed. We found an auto repair shop, and while we were waiting, I decided that I also needed a haircut. As it happened there was a barber shop just a few minutes' walk away. When it was my turn, the barber asked what brought me to Tulsa.

I hesitated, and said I was on vacation. I was in unfamiliar territory, and I didn't know how they felt about Jews. So, I lied. As we left, I decided that I would never do that again. In our liturgy we pray, "We will never feel ashamed" over our Jewish identity – *lo nayvosh l'olam vaed!* I think about Tulsa and about these words a lot – I will never be embarrassed about my faith again. I hope you will join me in this resolve.

One way to be proud is to go to shul. For the second year, the American Jewish Committee is sponsoring a "Show Up for Shabbat" campaign. The AJC urges all of us to attend services on October 25-26, the anniversary of the Pittsburgh shooting. I registered MJC, so join us. And please come to our adult education offerings – check out the brochure.

Another way is to go to Israel. Join me on MJC's trip, in November 2020! Learn all about it at a session on Monday, October 28 – I'll feed you felaffel!! Among the highlights is a visit to a diverse artists community in the town of Afula. It's one of

over 200 communities where Jews, Arabs, Druze, and other segments of Israeli society are working together to build a better country. This initiative is called MAKOM and is funded by JNF. As a JNF partner, our synagogue will support MAKOM this year, and I hope you will too.

There's so much we can do. Parents and grandparents, for your kids to be ready for high school and for college, they need time to explore their Jewish identities. I am urging you to prioritize Hebrew High, USY, BBYO, and similar programs. Also, prioritize colleges with a Hillel and with other signs of Jewish life.

Sensitivity is crucial. We ourselves perpetuate some Jewish stereotypes in popular culture, like the Jewish American Princess or JAP, for example. According to one anthropologist, she is a materialistic, conniving, self-centered and sexually withholding woman. Dr. Lipstadt points out that of course there are Jewish women who fit this description, and there are many more who do not. Further, Jews do not have a monopoly on this type. Lipstadt

writes that when we tell JAP jokes, we belittle Jews and women, and give license to others to do the same. (see p.79)

I believe that the vast majority of Americans are not antisemitic. Perhaps they've never met someone Jewish, or they simply don't know what to believe. Last night I spoke about my friend who suggested that I "jew someone down" to get a better deal. When I told him that phrase is offensive, he was mortified and apologized profusely. We should educate others about Jewish beliefs and customs and dispel misconceptions.

When we hear remarks or witness acts that are antisemitic or believe any form of prejudice we must call them out, even when they make us uncomfortable. And we must do it even if we believe we won't convince the other individual or group to change their attitude, because our defiance might inspire others watching, and simply because it's the right thing to do.

Cynically we might think, “Why should I support non-Jews when they do so little for us, or worse when they do us harm?” In the Bible the foreign prophet Bilam described us as “A people that dwells apart, not recognized by other nations” (Numbers 23:9). But I do not believe that it’s us against the world.

I worry that each antisemitic event makes us feel ostracized. For example, just hours after Yom Kippur five years ago, swastikas were painted on the AEPi House, a Jewish Fraternity, at Emory University. Too often we hear about such incidents and conclude that the college has a problem with antisemitism, as some do, but that’s not the whole story in this case. Not only did the school’s president send an impassioned email condemning the graffiti, but so did the student council, which invited everyone to wear blue the following day as a show of support. Thousands of students, faculty, and staff wore blue, making clear the values for which Emory stood. Dr. Lipstadt wrote that we should not assume the worst, because sometimes the ‘oy’ can turn into ‘joy’.

After Pittsburgh, I got a call from the pastor of St. Stephens AME Zion Church in Asbury Park. Our congregations have had joint programs the past couple of years. He invited us to his church for a vigil, to honor the memories of those murdered. A group of us went, and he asked me to preach tolerance and love to the audience. I was so moved because I realized that we're not alone in this fight.

Most Americans understood that Pittsburgh was an attack on American values. Wasi Mohamed, who was then the head of the Islamic Center in Pittsburgh, noted, "Negative rhetoric against the Jewish community is poison ... for our democracy." (Weiss, pp.178-9)

Knowing that others have our backs, we should have theirs. This fight not just against antisemitism – it's against any prejudice, because the Torah teaches that all people are created in the image of God. New York Times columnist Bari Weiss wrote, "Alliances

that allow you to ... work for the common good ... are fundamentally Jewish and should be sought out.” (ibid p.189)

In February of 2017, Natalie and I went to the Islamic Center in Middletown and helped to form a “Ring of Peace” during their Friday worship. Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and others surrounded the center, holding hands. I overheard a young child ask his mother, “Why are we here?” She taught him, “We’re making sure that they can pray in peace.” In describing the Messianic Era, the prophet Micah declared, “But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree; and none shall make them afraid ... For let all the peoples walk each one in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.” One reason God put us here, is to ensure that all people can live a life of faith without fear.

On behalf of my wife Natalie, my children Gabe, Emma and Dani, I wish all of us a *gmar chatimah tovah*, may we be sealed in the

Book of Life for blessings, and may we tap into our God given strength to stand for righteousness. Amen.