**Reflecting on the Recent Increase of Antisemitism**

**Yom Kippur 2019 -5780**

A few years ago, on the High Holy Days I started my remarks saying that it amazed me that after all the years after the Civil Rights era and the legislation as well as the March on Washington, I would still be marching and the struggle would still continue.

I imagine to some degree the question is similar, here in the US, most of us might have thought until recently that the struggle against antisemitism would not be a major topic at these High Holy Days.

This is not a universal feeling as we know that antisemitism never disappeared. The extent of its ugly existence often seemed to be found in other countries, Europe, South America, or the Arab world. Most major church groups, including the Catholic Church condemned antisemitism and tried to erase it from their theological positions. Most governments, even in Europe, tried to foster societies not plagued by this ugly disease. Nevertheless, as time went gone by and we thought that progress advanced general thinking to obliterate antisemitism as an inherent part of acceptable thought and behavior, we are now witnesses to a reality that demonstrates antisemitism is around us and being expressed in places where we thought it had died

or at least been extricated from normative behavior.

The necessity of increased security is not something any of us desired. Not to have arranged it would have been negligent on our part.

Violence struck in places like Pittsburgh and Poway. These could have been in any community anywhere in the US. Like any other insurance we invest in something we hope never to use. The presence of security guards at Temples and other Jewish institutions was not normal here in the US. We did not have this a few years ago and never expected it to become the norm. What we wanted was an open place of worship

where all felt welcome. While attacks have not been our direct experience that has not been the case around the world. I have been traveling to Europe, Brazil, Turkey and Israel for a large part of my life and this is how Jews have lived in other parts of the world. I remember in 1992 on a visit to Turkey, then a “friend” to Israel. When we visited the synagogue, we entered through a double security doorway, where a small group passes one gate, it was shut behind them and then the second gate was opened. I have experienced that in Brazil, Italy and France. In our country we had unlocked doors with no guards although there were a multitude of hate groups, identified by the ADL, even here in New York State.

Antisemitism is not something that just emerged, rather it is a historical reality that has once again become more violent. There no longer seems to be the shame that was felt during the early post-Holocaust decades. In fact, some of the recent antisemitism has been a reaction to that sense of guilt.

The European Forum on Antisemitism provides us with a working definition on antisemitism: “A certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed towards Jewish individuals and/or Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

Rabbi Till shared with us an expansive interpretation of the word ירא which means both fear and awe. That dual meaning is found in the very name of these Holy Days, נוראים ימים, the Days of Awe or the Days Fear.

Many have felt the fear generated by antisemitic acts here and abroad. Places like Pittsburgh, Poway, Miami, and Brooklyn have seen increased numbers of incidents. One can hardly keep up with the numerous painted swastikas in every corner of our country or attacks on Orthodox Jews in NYC. Even during Rosh Hashanah, a synagogue in Brooklyn was targeted.

In numerous places it has been reported that the number of hate crimes against Jews in New York City has risen significantly over the first nine months of this year. It is part of a citywide rise in such offenses.

According to Deputy Inspector Mark Molinari, who heads the department’s Hate Crimes Task Force the New York Police Department has reported 311 total hate crimes through September, as opposed to 250 reported through the same period in 2018. Molinari said 52 percent of the reported hate crimes, or 163, have targeted Jews. Over the same period last year, the NYPD reported 108 anti-Semitic hate crimes. That number is in relation to all the hate crimes committed against Blacks, Muslims, Hispanics, and LGBTQ individuals and institutions.

Our duty is to combat antisemitism through vigilance and precautions. Vigilance is the reason that our local institutions backed by the Federation and the Farash Foundation have increased security. To cower and disappear or retreat is granting them a victory. We must stand tall and be proud. And as we stand tall, we are not alone.

The ironic reality is that while the increase in antisemitic acts has occurred the outpouring of allies, people who join us in our time of stress is an amazing sign. This is not like Germany but a new truth that the allies are speaking up and standing with us.

America is not Nazi Germany. What exists here after antisemitic events is a broad based interfaith, interethnic community standing up by our sides.

After Pittsburgh 3700 people came to TBK with a very significant numbers of non-Jews. They were church clergy, and Christian friends as well as supporters from the Islamic Center and other faith groups. As I looked out from the bima during this terribly sad event I was heartened by the overwhelming number of friends. They stood with us as we have stood with them.

This has been a two-way street. After both Pittsburgh and Poway many leaders and associates from Rochester made immediate contact with their Jewish friends and the community. It was no different than us reaching out after incidents such as the one in Christ Church, New Zealand, when that morning I was over at the Islamic Center and many of you came the following Sunday to rally and stand in support of that act of hateful violence.

This past summer when I was studying at the Hartman Institute, Jan and I took a 4-hour tour in the valley of Ella where David, a symbol of our people, slew the giant enemy, Goliath. Perhaps there is a symbolic parallel between us as David and Goliath as the symbol of our ultimate enemy, antisemitism? One of our group on this grueling mid-summer hike was Rabbi Steve Moskowitz.

Rabbi Moskowitz recently shared his blog in “The Times of Israel.” He wrote, “It is easy to identify anti-Semites when they wear hoods and paint swastikas. It is straightforward when you can shut down their shadowy ways of communicating with each other. It is much more difficult when anti-Semites hold PhDs and advocate for women’s rights or lead the charge for those in the LGBTQ community.”

I need to emphasize here that the revitalization of obvious expressions of antisemitism are not new creations. They were simply below the surface. Additionally, we must reaffirm that antisemitism is a product of both the left and the right. It is simply invalid to point to the other side of the political aisle to see antisemitism as their sole domain. On the right we see too many examples of intolerant nationalism worldwide that converts into antisemitism. The hatred that created tragedies in Pittsburgh and Poway are all part of the violent hatred from the right. In Europe that expression is endorsed by legitimate political parties.

The condemnation of Israel and Zionism as the greatest evil of our time, declaring the human rights violations to be the worst in the world and the delegitimization of Israel as a nation and not seeing Israel’s own democratic system is a true form of antisemitism from the left. Denying Jewish expressions at protests for women’s or LGBTQ rights is antisemitism from the left.

Professor Deborah Lipstadt in her book Antisemitism Here and Now explains that this goes back centuries as in the “19th century

those on the political right were accusing Jews of being Socialists, Communists, and revolutionaries. Those on the political left were accusing all Jews of being wealth-obsessed capitalists who were opposed to the social and economic betterment of the poor and working classes.” Do you hear echoes of this and similar tropes today?

Some try to tell us that we can be a progressive, **or** we can be for Israel. Here, I learn from Deborah Lipstadt: “if you **only** see the manifestations of antisemitism on the other side, then you are not seeing clearly. We need to condemn antisemitism on all sides. Every manifestation of Jew-hatred is dangerous.”

In her interview in the Atlantic Monthly Lipstadt expressed the following. “On some level, it is the same old, same old. The construct is the same, the stereotypes are the same. But I think what is different today is that we’re seeing a perfect storm, in that usually it comes from either the right or the left politically. Today we’re seeing it from the political right and the political left…” Lipstadt continues, “To try and defeat an irrational supposition - especially when it is firmly held by its proponents – with a rational explanation is virtually impossible.”

For those who didn’t see the seriousness of the demonstrations in Charlottesville, Lipstadt makes it clear when explaining, “Antisemitism is not simply the hatred of something ‘foreign,’ but the hatred of a perpetual evil in the world. Jews are not **an** enemy but **the** ultimate enemy.” She goes on, “Our challenge was and continues to be to fight the antisemite without elevating him or her in stature. Antisemites must be fought, especially if there is a chance that their passion or ideology stands a chance of becoming part of a national policy, but they are people of no consequence.”

Bari Weiss, whose op-ed piece in the New York Times has recently written a book, How To Fight Antisemitism. In her recent piece she wrote, “…far left activists increasingly say to Jews: you need to make a choice.” Then she asks, “Does safety come from contorting ourselves to look more like everyone else? Or does it come from drilling down into the wellspring of what made us special to begin with?” “…The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the only way to fight is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are.” “…In these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul — and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours.”

I emphasize that our most powerful defense is the combination of vigilance and pride. Being proud Jews who stand up for our beliefs

and celebrate our identity is a powerful message.

One area where there needs to be clarification is the crossover from antisemitism to anti-Israel or anti-Zionism. I truly believe there needs to be distinctions between the two,

while at the same time realizing that much of the anti-Israel or anti-Zionist expressions are deeply rooted in an antisemitic sentiment.

Lipstadt asks the question and cites Steven Pinsker’s work, (Against Selective Demonization). She asks, “Why no boycotts against academics from China, India, Russia, or Pakistan, to take a few examples, which have also been embroiled in occupations and violent conflicts, and which unlike Israel, face no existential threat or enemies with genocidal statements and ongoing conflicts, isn’t there something unsavory about singling out the citizens of one of these countries for unique vilification and punishment?”

In some cases, this is not an easy distinction. Can one be critical of Israel and still not be antisemitic. That is possible but must be carefully examined.

Most of you know that I have always been a lover of Israel. I consider myself a Zionist and at times have toyed with making Aliyah. On my next visit I will have gone to Israel 45 times and have brought numerous groups to see the country I love as well as urging our students to visit and make their own attachments, but to do so with open eyes.

I have not always agreed with the governmental policies of Israel, as I haver not always agreed with the governmental policies here. I applaud Israel’s great accomplishments but also know of her faults and her failures. What I see is an imbalance of criticism without truly seeing the legitimate claims for a Jewish State in the land. This does not exclude Palestinians also having legitimate claims for autonomy in the land. But how many other countries commit more atrocious actions towards their minorities? It is a stain on them as well as a failure in Israel when there is discrimination and unfair treatment. There must be a distinction made between apartheid and genocide, which are not the case in Israel and discrimination.

I need to make one more point. I am opposed to the BDS movement against the State of Israel. Too often it is simply an attempt to negate any Israeli right to exist. Yet I also have heard from Israeli experts that the BDS movement is not an existential threat to Israel’s existence. For the most part anti-BDS legislation will backfire and is not worth what we sacrifice in the principles of free speech and the rights for all to protest.

I recently read a Facebook posting by a Palestinian American, citing a news source that never has a positive word about Israel. This source describes a woman being shot to death at a security checkpoint. In the description they gloss over that she was carrying something in her hand which was kicked aside by a soldier. The source then pointed to an Israeli account that later showed a picture of a knife lying on the ground, as if it were fabricated.

During the previous week I had read about a Palestinian woman coming to a checkpoint, trying to stab soldiers. This is not the first time this has occurred, and we have heard too often of Palestinians willing to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the cause. We also know that after the periods of terrible bombings and terror attacks against civilians in Israel that with the addition of the checkpoints and barriers, these attacks have dropped to a minimum.

Knowing that these are two sides of a single incident, I ask, what seems plausible in this case. Israelis simply shooting a woman for no cause or acting to prevent an attack? You be the judge, knowing that your judgement may be right or wrong.

Rabbi Bruce Block cited Rabbi Joshua Davidson of Temple Emanu-El in NYC from his Rosh Hashanah sermon.

Davidson quoted the great poet Chaim Nachman Bialik who referred to the synagogue as the "spiritual fortress” of our people.

Rabbi Davidson lamented that our synagogues have now become actual fortresses.

Block mentions that there was a passage in one of our Prayer Books “to the effect that our ancestors put on the armor of faith and fortitude. And that is what our synagogues provide: armor, spiritual armor. The armor of faith and fortitude.” I agree when Block further states that “there is a unifying theme for us as Jews. It is this: we need the synagogue as a spiritual fortress just as Bialik said our ancestors did. The synagogue is where we get fitted for the armor of faith and fortitude and draw strength in community with one another.

But there is also so much more the synagogue can be. Yet, for now, this need may take priority.

I want to conclude with a line at end of Modim anachnu lach in Mishkan T’filah:

“We pray that we may live not by our fears but by our hopes,

not by our words but by our deeds.”

How do we do that? What must we do? Be proud of who we are. Yet at the same time be vigilant.

May we be blessed with both safety in the future and pride in our existence as the Jewish people.

May we go from strength to strength. Amen