

“Respect Yourself; Confronting Contemporary Anti-Semitism”

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Before I left to come back home from a few weeks of studying in Israel this past summer, I was doing some shopping, buying gifts and souvenirs for family members and friends. I stopped into this little boutique on a trendy street in Jerusalem where I was welcomed by a bubbly, gregarious woman in her late-60's. *Shalom!* She exclaimed! And in a perfect Texas drawl, an accent I know well from the nine years I lived there, she said, *Now how can I help you today darlin'?* Let me tell you, she didn't just sound like a Texan, she looked like a Texan. In the middle of a hot Middle Eastern summer, she was dressed to the nines: open toed, high heels, her acrylics were flawless, her lips were lacquered with cherry red gloss, and you know what they say in Texas, *The higher the hair, the closer to God!* She could have won the Ms. Texas Senior Pageant...I was momentarily confused about which lone star state I was in! I told her I had lived in Dallas for 9 years and we played some Texas Jewish geography. Then she asked me what I did for a living, and I told her I was a rabbi. *“Come on now,”* she said, *“you're too young and cute to be a rabbi.”* Let me tell you, I spent a lot more money in that shop that I had ever intended to!

This Texas charmer grew up in Waco, which is about 100 miles south of Dallas, and that she made *aliyah* several decades earlier. But she went on to tell me that she had recently returned to Waco for her 50th high school reunion. Of all the alumni of that high school, since she had come the farthest to attend the reunion, they asked her to give the speech. She told me that she stood at the podium and said, *50 years ago I wouldn't have been allowed to attend this reunion because the country club where we are gathered today did not admit Jews. Today, I'm addressing you not only as a proud graduate of this high school, but as a citizen of the Jewish State of Israel, who came all the way from Jerusalem to attend this reunion.* She told this story with such a sense of pride; like she was righting a historical wrong! By standing proudly in that place where she was once unwelcome, she was reclaiming a sense of dignity not only for herself but for every other Jew in the history of Waco, TX who was denied entry or told they didn't belong there.

As she was telling me this story, the most unexpected thought popped into my mind...I was actually feeling nostalgic for a time when 'country club anti-Semitism' was the worst form of anti-Semitism the Jewish people had to deal with in America. How quaint, I thought! You know what happened when Jews were restricted from country clubs? We started our own country clubs! What happened when Jews couldn't get into fraternities or sororities? We chartered **Jewish** fraternities and sororities. When Jewish doctors couldn't get residencies or fellowships in hospitals, we established 133 Jewish hospitals all around the country...Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion, Maimonides, Menorah, Beth Israel... And when Jews couldn't get jobs in major law firms, Jewish lawyers opened their own law firms...and the irony of history is that nowadays those are some of the top clubs, hospitals, firms, fraternities and sororities...and non-Jews line up to get into them! The Jewish community responded to restrictions and quotas and caps and limitations by creating parallel institutions of excellence. In the heart of New England's prestigious, restricted ivies; Brandeis University was founded in 1948, when Jews and other minorities, including women, faced discrimination in higher education. Today Brandeis is considered one

of the top universities in the nation, with Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners on faculty, and countless notable alumni. This has been the story of the Jewish people in America.... This past year things changed. This past year was a watershed moment for Jews in this country.

I will not soon forget the Shabbat morning of October 27, 2018, just over a month after last Rosh Hashanah. We had a bat mitzvah here at Har Shalom that morning; someone came up to me in the middle of services, and whispered in my ear that 11 people were been killed in a synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. I decided not to say anything publicly, so that this young woman's memory of her bat mitzvah would not be forever linked to the deadliest attack on the Jewish people in American history. The next day I was in a car with three other rabbis driving to Pittsburgh to offer comfort and support to a community that was utterly in shock. We drove right to the corner of Shady Avenue and Wilkins, got out of the car, and just stood there with people outside the Tree of Life Synagogue, which had been turned into a crime scene. We hugged people, prayed with people, listened to people's stories of the victims they knew, heard all about this tight-knit, *haimische* little neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, where a new and terrifying chapter in the story of the Jewish people in America was being written.

Fast forward to this summer. Just a few months ago. Sari and I went to the Jewish sleepaway camp that our kids have attended for over a decade in the Texas Hill country, outside of Austin. On Friday night, in a dining hall filled with hundreds of energetic, *meshuggenah* campers, I was asked to recite Kiddush before Shabbat dinner. As I stood on a riser and held up the Kiddush cup, I noticed at the back of the dining hall a very serious looking police officer, wearing a bullet-proof vest, and armed to the hilt, scanning the room. Even in a well-hidden, remote Jewish summer camp, far from civilization there was that reminder of a new sense of vulnerability that now pervades the American Jewish community. We have certainly become more vigilant here at Har Shalom as other attacks and crimes have been perpetrated against the Jewish people and Jewish institutions in this country. We've got more police protection, more security protocols, more coordination with law enforcement and other Jewish agencies. Who wouldn't exchange a little country club anti-Semitism for the existential fear and insecurity that so many Jews feel in this country today?

Complicating matters even more, the anti-Semitism that has surfaced in America emanates from both the far left as well as the far right.¹ It has racial overtones and political machinations. It is more conspicuous and undisguised than ever before. I'm sure you remember those chants "Jews will not replace us." The meaning of that despicable slogan is that Jews, many of whom appear to be white, but who often ally themselves with progressive causes, the causes of racial minorities in particular, are actually the betrayers of whiteness. It's like what the sociologist Milton Himmelfarb observed half a century ago: *Jews earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans*. Jewish progressivism is seen by white nationalists as the means by which minorities will overtake them in society. Remember why the murderer in Pittsburgh targeted the Tree of Life Synagogue, even though there are close to 20 synagogues in the Pittsburgh area? **Because that shul was sponsoring a Refugee Shabbat!** Because Jews are hard-wired to care about refugees, and asylum seekers, and migrants, and strangers—because we were strangers in the land of Egypt—we are, in the twisted minds of right wing fanatics, bringing about the change in the complexion and composition of society that they fear and dread the most. This is the anti-Semitism that is obsessed with conspiracy theories about George Soros,

¹ Weiss, Bari. How to Fight Anti-Semitism. Crown, 2019.

the Rothschild family, and a cabal of wealthy Jews who they imagine control the world with puppet strings. I'm waiting on pins and needles for someone on the alt-right to start advertising that the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, is Jewish. That would add a whole new layer of fun to the impeachment inquiry!

However, if Jews are not white enough for anti-Semites on the far right, they are seemingly too white for anti-Semites on the far left. The far left sees American Jews as Eastern European interlopers who can hide behind their white complexions, take off their yarmulkes, or change their names to sound less Jewish, and who have become financially successful in part because of those facts...never mind the reality that 15% of American Jews, that's over a million Jews, are Jews of color! But the far left denies that Jews are victims of any prejudice, and when Jews intersect with other oppressed groups like the LGBTQ community, Jews are told they must drop their identifying features in order to share in those plights. Recall that Jewish lesbians were ordered not to march with rainbow flags bearing the Star of David, in a recent demonstration in Washington. And then there's the gigantic elephant in the room...that is Israel. The country that is more often singled-out for condemnation and opprobrium than any other. Israel the colonizer. Israel the oppressor. Israel the apartheid state. Israel, the one country in the entire family of flawed, imperfect nations that is told it does not have a right to exist. On the left you may be able to embrace Louis Farrakhan, but never a democratically elected Israeli official. You can wave a Palestinian flag, but never one with a star of David, and certainly never an Israeli flag. I am so relieved that the Women's March has finally parted ways with Linda Sarsour, who claimed that Judaism and feminism are incompatible, and Tamika Malory who refused to answer a question about whether Israel has a right to exist. If you plan to march this year, you can feel a whole lot better about it because the organization has purged these two from its ranks.

I'll tell you, I learned a lot in 5779. This past year has been a wakeup call for a lot of us, and I want to share some of the things I've gleaned from the events we have faced as a community since we were last here on Rosh Hashana.

The first thing I learned was that Theodor Herzl was wrong. Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism was right about so much, please don't misunderstand; I admire and revere Herzl as one of the greatest leaders in all of Jewish history. But history has also proven that Herzl's belief that a sovereign Jewish state would eradicate antisemitism once and for all was utterly naïve. Rather, as the Russian born Israeli historian Victor Tcherichover once said "there are few things in human history that have a history of 2000 years; anti-Semitism is one of them."² Anti-semitism is a disease, a pathology, a congenital defect that afflicts many people, all over the world. The State of Israel didn't extinguish it, the United States didn't eliminate it, even the Holocaust didn't put an end to it once and for all. We may have to wait for the *mashiach* to cure this sickness once and for all, but until then we have to learn how to live with it; how to manage the symptoms; contain it; and do what we can to keep it from metastasizing.

One way not to deal with the persistence of anti-semitism in the world is for the Jewish people to adopt an identity of victimhood. Frankly, I am witnessing this more and more, both from individuals and Jewish communal organizations. I guess it's not totally our fault...The haggadah we read each year an Passover tells us *bechol dor vador*, in every generation, *omdim aleinu lechaloteinu*...there is someone who is out to kill us! The great historian Simon Rawidowicz

² Chanes, Jerome. "Jews are Making anti-Semitism and Victimhood Our Entire Identity," *Ha'aretz*, August 1, 2019

wrote that a victim mentality actually serves as a coping mechanism...if you imagine that there's yet another mortal enemy waiting to kill you, you sort of protect yourself for when things actually do get bad. But "the downside," wrote Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt, "is that this worldview could become the sum total of our identity!"³ How many of you have told that not very funny joke that every Jewish holiday has the same script: They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat? I never tell that joke. It might make us chuckle before we dig into our yontiff brisket, but when you think about it, this joke just undermines all the magnificent history, deep wisdom, beautiful traditions and teachings of our people, and boils all of Jewish history into one long saga of outrunning our enemies. Do a me a favor in this New Year: Please don't tell that joke to your kids! I don't want to teach my kids or yours that they should be Jewish because people hate them! That they should be Jewish because they are the history's eternal victims. I read recently in an issue of *Hadassah* magazine about 74 year old Margaret Hodge, a member of the British Parliament from East London. A self-described "avowedly secular Jew" who had almost nothing to do with the Jewish community for most of her life, now admits to being terrified by Jeremy Corbin and the anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. She declared "My father couldn't make me Jewish. My Jewish friends couldn't make me Jewish. My rabbi couldn't make me Jewish—it took the leader of the Labour Party to make me Jewish."⁴ In other words, it took anti-Semitism, fear, victimization, to make Margaret Hodge a Jew. What kind of Jewish identity is that? The modern Jewish historian and author Jerome Chanes says, "the problem with anti-Semitism today is not anti-Semitism; it is Jewish perceptions of anti-Semitism... We are formalizing the hatred against us as the key marker of our identity and culture." I think that's very dangerous. I don't care how much money it raises or how much it galvanizes us. If we accept this notion that we are the perpetual victims, then our Jewish self-understanding will be very, very unhealthy.

Deborah Lipstadt makes powerful, if obvious, point in her most recent book on antisemitism. "Despite the fact that seven decades ago one out of every three Jews on the face of the earth was murdered, the Jewish people thrive today as a culture, a community, and a nation." God forbid that we lose sight of this fact. There is no time in history and no place on earth where the Jewish people have prospered more than the United States of America.

This past April, America's newspaper of record, and perhaps the most influential newspaper in the world, the *New York Times*, published a political cartoon that you would have expected to see in a Nazi propaganda piece. It depicted a hunched-over, blind President Trump wearing a yarmulke and walking a dog with the face of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The cartoon was met with a huge uproar, which led to the *Times* not only deleting the cartoon from its electronic editions, but the editorial page published an apology the next that contained the words "offensive," "dangerous," and "anti-Semitic." The *Times* then fired the syndicated service that provided the cartoon and instituted an internal process and training to avoid future incidents.

On nearly every campus where a pro-BDS resolution came to a vote, it was resoundingly defeated. On the few campuses where the student government managed to pass such a resolution, the trustees of those schools, who actually make the decisions about where and how university funds are invested all dismissed and defeated pro-BDS resolutions.

³ Lipstadt, Deborah. Antisemitism, Here and Now. Schocken Books, 2019.

⁴ Frazer, Jenni The Rise of Anti-Semitism in Corbyn's Labour Party, *Hadassah*, March/April 2019, p. 18

In a recent poll, do you know which religious group Americans reported having the warmest feelings for? YOU! Jews more than any other religious group in America!⁵ And 74% said they have a favorable view of Israel.⁶ Even with a rise in anti-Semitism in America, I categorically reject any and all comparisons with 1930's Germany. America is not a country with state sponsored Jewish hatred or prejudice. Our legal system is set up to protect Jews and other minorities, not persecute them. That kind of hysteria that imagines we are reliving the third Reich is wildly inaccurate. The fact is, we are living in the biggest historical anomaly ever, right now! The antisemitism that our people endured in other times and places was not only the norm, it was much more virulent and deadly than it is even on America's worst day.

Another lesson I have come to appreciate is a survival strategy adopted 1,949 years ago. When the Temple in Jerusalem was burnt to the ground and everything that was familiar to the Jewish people was obliterated, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai went to Vespasian, the Roman general in charge and said the famous words, *Ten-li Yavneh ve'chachameiha*, Give me Yavneh and its Sages!⁷ Yavneh was a backwater town of no particular significance, where the rabbis decided to build an academy, a school. If Judaism was to survive, the Jewish people had to know what was at stake. Why it was worth it to perpetuate this people. To paraphrase Jonathan Weisman, author of the 2018 book *Semitism*,⁸ American Jews seem sure of what we are against, but we are not as confident about what we are for. My Hebrew school experience taught me to rattle off names of many enemies of the Jewish people by heart: Whether Pharaoh and Haman or the Babylonians, Romans, Crusaders, Inquisitors, or Nazis. But I couldn't have told you the difference between Midrash and Mishnah, Torah and Talmud, Rashi and Rambam. As the always eloquent Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says: "Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism, and they are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism."⁹ If we want respect from others, we first have to learn why we ought to respect ourselves, our history, our values, and our traditions. You want to invest in a powerful antidote to anti-Semitism: How about robust, well-funded, quality Jewish education!

Let me tell you an amazing story: My eldest daughter Mia played on a competitive, travel basketball club in high school. Not only was she the only observant Jew on the team, she was the only Jew on the team. From the very beginning, she explained to the coaches and her teammates that she observes the Jewish Sabbath and that she might have to make some special lodging and food arrangements in order to play on Shabbat. The first travel tournament they played was in Waukegan, IL, and this particular venue was about 4 miles from the hotel where the team was staying. On Saturday morning, a cousin of mine who lives in Chicago met her at the hotel and walked her to the venue. The coach told her that she would walk back to the hotel with Mia on Saturday after all the games were over. Mia brought food with her, and basically camped out at the basketball facility for most of the day while the rest of the team went out for lunch between games. Well, unbeknownst to Mia, she was the topic of conversation at that lunch. After all the games were over for that day the coach came to Mia and said, "I have some news for you. We decided that we are all going to walk you back to the hotel today." And the entire team of about

⁵ https://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/pf_14-07-16_interreligiousrelations_totalratings1/

⁶ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/229199/americans-remain-staunchly-israel-corner.aspx>

⁷ Talmud Bavli, Gittin 56b

⁸ Weisman, Jonathan. *Semitism*, Being Jewish in the America in the Age of Trump. St. Martin's Press, 2018.

⁹ <http://rabbisacks.org/things-life-has-taught-me-about-judaism/>

15 girls and their coaches accompanied Mia on a four mile walk after a long day of tournament play. Those non-Jewish kids and coaches were not only fascinated by Judaism, they were deeply respectful of Mia's commitment to her tradition, and to being a part of the team. Not long after, we had the whole team over for Shabbat dinner, and many became dear friends of Mia's who returned week after week to hang out at our house on Friday nights, and of course to eat challah, which they loved! One of them even wrote her college essay about the experience! And she got in! Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism and they are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism." If we want respect from others, we first better respect ourselves, our history, our values, and our traditions, rather than shirking or hiding or compromising.

In the aftermath of the Pittsburgh shooting, the first calls I received were from local priests, ministers, and imams. When I went to Pittsburgh the next day, I learned that one of the first groups to reach out to the local Jewish community was the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh. Local Muslims announced a campaign to raise money to help victims and their families with short-term needs: like medical bills and funeral expenses. Within the first six hours they raised \$25,000. Just two days later, they had raised \$150,000. Two days after that, \$200,000 and soon thereafter nearly a quarter of a million dollars. And when 40 Muslim worshippers were gunned down in New Zealand, those same Pittsburgh Jews raised thousands of dollars to support the needs of that community in crisis. Because we are so trained to focus on who our enemies are, we often overlook our friends. The Jewish community in America is blessed with many sincere, genuine friends. This is also a unique historical anomaly. However, for those friendships to perpetuate, we must also show up for those communities when they are under attack, when they experience prejudice or persecution, and when they feel vulnerable. Don't let anti-Semites with bull horns drown out the many voices of support and friendship that we enjoy in this country. And don't be so obsessed with your own victimhood that you don't hear the cries of others who desperately need the support and influence of the American Jewish community. When there are true anti-Semites we must call them out and condemn them immediately and unequivocally. And when there are friends who stand with us, and speak up for us, and support us, we must thank them, and reciprocate that friendship whenever possible.

My dearest friends, we do need to be more vigilant today; that is an unfortunate fact of life for the time being. There is a spike in antisemitism in this country and abroad. But let us not succumb to fear, or intimidation, or hopelessness. If we do, we grant the haters, the anti-Semites, the bigots a victory. They want us to be vulnerable; they want us to feel unsettled in our synagogues and schools and community centers; they want to link us to conspiracy theories and charges of dual loyalty; they want us to question whether we have a right to exist here or anywhere else. But we are a strong and resilient people. And I, for one, refuse to become the butt of a joke that reduces all of the Judaism that I love into one long saga of running from our enemies.

I'm not going to hide out from my community because I think it will make me safer, I'm going to stand with my community because I know it will make us all stronger.

I'm not going to abandon Israel because I don't agree with every policy of this particular government any more than I'm going to abandon America because I don't agree with all the policies of the current administration, or because there are a few bad apples in Congress! Both Israel and America are greater than any one regime or single chapter in their glorious histories.

If you believe that there is more to being Jewish than being a victim;

that we have so many reasons to celebrate our traditions and values;
that we have every bit a right to be proud of who we are and what we stand for
then I hope you will enter 5780 with the determination to live
nobly,
joyfully,
publicly,
and unapologetically as American Jews.

American Jews who are devoted to this country, and proudly Zionistic. American Jews who are not required to shed what is unique about us, how we live, eat, dress, celebrate, or practice in order to be full participating citizens of this country.

Don't let anyone, from the left to the right, or anywhere in between try to convince you otherwise!

L'shana Tova!