

## ***Mass Weddings in Brooklyn, the First Amendment, & the Charge of Anti-Semitism; What is our responsibility?***

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Last Sunday I “attended” a brit milah, on Zoom of course, celebrating the birth of a new baby boy in the Har Shalom community. It was such a welcome simcha in a week with so many funerals. As the mohel offered a brief introduction to the ceremony and rituals, he mentioned, as many mohels do, the custom of lighting a candle before the bris begins. He said that the reason probably came from the pre-electricity era, and the importance of the room being well-lit for the procedure. Of course, there is another historical connection between candles and brises that some mohels mention, although this one did not. That is, during the Spanish Inquisition, when any public expression of Judaism could result in one’s death, a candle placed in the window was the secret sign within the Jewish community that a bris was taking place inside the home. Can you imagine a time when observing a lifecycle event like a bris or a wedding would incur the wrath of the secular authorities? Can you imagine a celebration of life or love being crime, and having to cloak it in clandestine signals that only other Jews would understand?

Well, fast-forward about 500 years, and rotate your globe from Barcelona to Brooklyn. Today, a whole new generation of Jews are conducting Jewish life cycle events in secret, and actively attempting to thwart the authorities. Reports of covering windows with paper, and stationing guards at doorways are becoming more and more common, and sometimes, plans of massive gatherings are kept under raps until it is too late to stop them. Perhaps you had the same response as I did recently when opening up the Washington Post to an article about the wedding of Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the grandson of the Grand Rebbe of the Satmar Hasidic Sect, Rabbi Aaron Teitelbaum. My response was to cringe; my response was sadness...and anger...and embarrassment. According to the article, the wedding of this Satmar couple, which is akin to a royal wedding in this community, was attended by 7,000 people. A picture accompanied the article that depicted a massive hall, with men in black bekishes and streimels shoulder-to-shoulder surrounding the bride and groom. I did not see one face mask in the picture. It was terrifying...both for what it represented about the Satmar Hasidic approach to the pandemic, as well as what it portended for the secular authorities, not to mention the rest of the world, when the wedding became public.

Satmar is one of the largest Hasidic sects in the world. Following the devastating effects of the Holocaust, the community and grand rebbe relocated from Hungary to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Satmar is known to be a fiercely insular community that rejects all forms of modern culture and influence. If you saw “Unorthodox” or came here to listen to Abby Stein last year, you got a sense of what the mentality of Satmar is like. They are anti-Zionists, claiming that the creation of a Jewish state is contrary to God’s law because it was not brought into existence by the Mashiach, or by religious Jews, for that matter. Yiddish is the spoken language of the community, and you might recall from Abby Stein that even as an adult in the Satmar community she could not speak English at all. And what this massive gathering also seemed to telegraph was that Satmar does not feel beholden to the laws or restrictions currently being imposed to stop the spread of the deadly Coronavirus.

There is an episode in our parasha, where our ancestor Ya’akov, Jacob, fleeing from his brother Esau, on his way from Beersheva to Haran, sets up camp and places a formation of stones before laying down for the night. The language is confusing:

*Vayikach mei'avnei ha'makom vayasem m'ra-ashotav...*and Jacob took from the stones in that area, and placed them, literally around his head, *vayishkav ba'makom ha'hu*, and he laid down in that place for the night.

Why did he place the stones around his head? Rashi answers: To protect his head from wild animals in the night. But what about the rest of his body? A midrash comes to explain that protecting his head was a metaphor. You see, according to tradition, Jacob was a *talmid chacham*...he was devoted to learning and studying, having spent significant time learning in the ancient yeshivot of Shem and Ever. Now he was outside of his comfort zone, away from his studies, outside of the protection of his home...literally and figuratively in the wilderness. When the Torah said that Jacob was protecting his head, what it meant was that Jacob was protecting his mind from the negative and threatening influences of the world. That he was insulating his thoughts from the dangerous persuasions of non-Jewish or non-religious society.

Satmar has erected these same boulders of separation even from the threats of a global health crisis. In the mind of its leaders, weddings must be public, large gatherings and are intrinsic to the promotion the ideology to its Hassidim. And any attempt to reign it in is nothing more than blatant anti-semitism. Let's face it, anti-Semitism is an increasing concern and fear in this country. And not just in places where there are few if any Jews. While New York City had an overall drop in the crime rate last year, hate crimes, and crimes specifically targeting Jews have been skyrocketing. For Jews who publicly identify as such on the street, whether by wearing a yarmulke or other religiously identifiable garb, there was an increase anti-Semitic attacks, harassment, and violence of 64%. Last year at about this time, a rabbi's home was forcibly entered during a Hanukkah celebration by a machete-wielding attacker who stabbed several people, killing one while injuring and traumatizing many more. I never thought twice about wearing a kippah on the streets in New York City...London, maybe; Paris, yes. But New York City? Anti-Semitism has seen a resurgence and there is no denying it. And let's face it, New York Mayor Bill deBlasio didn't do anyone any favors when he so inelegantly tweeted out to "the Jewish community and all communities" that the NYPD would be dispatched to arrest anyone participating in large gatherings. "The Jewish community and all communities," come on Mayor. Either name all of them or none of them; either crack down equally on all offenders of mass gatherings or none of them...but signaling out the Jewish community only fanned the flames of those who are hostile to Jews, or who traffic in conspiracy theories about Jews either intentionally starting the virus or spreading the virus. Governor Cuomo had fallen into a similar trap by capping gatherings for worship at 10 people in red zones (where there is a 4% positivity rate for more than 10 days), while allowing other businesses to function without similar restrictions. But do I think that Andrew Cuomo is anti-Semitic? The New York Governor who last year was awarded the highest honor bestowed by the Anti-Defamation League, the American Democratic Legacy Award specifically for his efforts to combat anti-Semitism in the state?! No I do not believe for one minute that he is anti-Semitic.

And I also do not believe that the Free Exercise clause of the Constitution should preclude the state from ever concerning itself with religious gatherings. This is not the Spanish Inquisition. There is no state-sponsored persecution of Jews in America, God forbid. Jews are free to worship, observe, and express our beliefs and traditions without infringement or prejudice. But we are not free to ignore a grave public health crisis! *Pikuach nefesh* is not just a slogan, it is an absolute, core value. Pretending that the virus won't be spread among 7,000 chasidim singing and dancing, eating and drinking shoulder to shoulder at a wedding is not within our protected rights as a religious community. And it is irresponsible of the Satmar Rebbe, the

leader of a community who would obey his every command, to go about unmasked and to encourage his followers to flout the law of the land. The Talmud makes clear, *dina de'malchuta dina*, the law of the land must be followed. I agree that communications from the mayor and governor have been occasionally clumsy and unbalanced, but laws restricting mass gatherings in parts of the city where there are dangerous outbreaks are not anti-Semitic they are pro-semitic, they are philo-semitic! Quite simply, observing these ordinances will ultimately save Jewish lives, not endanger them. That's why I'm standing here today in a mostly empty sanctuary! That's why we have undertaken such careful reviews of our practices and imposed such tight restrictions on attendance. It is about protecting and saving lives!

The Talmud states in tractate Bava Kamma in the name of Rabbi Yehudah:

*Hay man d'bai chasida, lekayem milei d'nezikin...*One who wishes to be a chasid, a pious person, should be scrupulous about observing the laws of damages. That means, a true chasid is exceedingly careful not to cause damage or injury to another person or their property. I pray that our Chasidic brothers and sisters recognize that more important than big public weddings is being a chasid whose chief concern is the welfare of others. I hate criticizing our fellow Jews...there are enough critics of Jews in the world. But this is not a time to play the anti-Semitism card. This is a time to rally for the health and well-being not only of the Jewish people, but all people.

May healing and safety return to our communities, our nation, our world, very soon. Amen.