

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Yom Kippur Morning
September 30, 2017

Antisemitism in a New Era

What a headline...“Steve Bannon Loves Israel and the Jews – Really.” In this recent op-ed, published by the *Forward*, Morton Klein, President of the Zionist Organization of America, explains why his organization is featuring Bannon at their upcoming Superstar Gala Dinner this November.

Klein complains that far left-wing groups and the media are delegitimizing the best friends of Israel and the Jewish people by calling them “extremists” and “anti-Semites.” So, he sets the record straight: Bannon has been misinterpreted. When Bannon said that “Breitbart is the platform of the alt-right” he meant that alt-right denotes the idea of “anti-establishment” and “anti-mainstream.” Bannon, he argues, “despises bigots, and has never allowed bigots, racists or neo-Nazis to publish in Breitbart.”

Heck, Breitbart opened a news bureau in Jerusalem. And three of their top writers are yarmulke-wearing Orthodox Jews. ([The Forward](#), September 7, 2017)

What a shonda.

For as long as I can remember, it was the right-wing of the Jewish community that found antisemitism lurking under every rock. It was only three years ago that the Anti-Defamation League under the leadership of conservative-leaning Abraham Foxman published the hopelessly flawed survey on global antisemitism, claiming that one quarter of the world is antisemitic. Even Jay Michaelson, an ordained Conservative rabbi and lifelong Jewish educator, gets labeled an anti-Semite after he muddles his way through the survey. (“[I Am 1 Billionth ‘Anti-Semite’](#)” *The Forward*, May 20, 2014)

But now it seems that the left and the mainstream of the Jewish community are alarmed by the spike in antisemitism following last year’s election of Donald Trump, while the right is telling us to stop over-reacting – or as Foxman said last winter following the dozens of bomb threats to Jewish community centers and vandalism in Jewish cemeteries: “Cool it, cool it” and lay off the president.

Every year when I go home for Thanksgiving I have breakfast with an old mentor and dear friend of mine, a self-defined proud neo-conservative, who supervised my internship at the Jewish Community Relations Council when I was in college. After 20 years we’ve barely missed a year.

“I voted for Trump,” he said pleasantly, as we began to catch up.

I almost choked. “You told me you weren’t going to vote.”

“Well...I changed my mind. I had to decide between an immoral sociopathic liar and a narcissistic juvenile vulgarian.”

“So you voted for Trump? What about the Neo-Nazis, and Bannon, and those godawful tweets? What about our responsibility to stay vigilant against anyone who fans the flames of antisemitism?”

It was a little awkward. I mean, I was sitting across from a man who has devoted his life to fighting antisemitism. Now *I* was lecturing *him* about antisemitism and *he* was telling *me* to relax?

I was raised in a suburb of Cincinnati, and I never really experienced much antisemitism growing up. I never even encountered much in my work as a rabbi. Sure, there were little slights here and there, but they were negligible. Of course antisemitism existed, but it wasn’t directly in my orbit. Certainly many of you have experienced far more than I have.

And until last year no one had ever asked me to speak about antisemitism in depth. But last November I was asked to do a program on antisemitism for the mental health staff at the UW so that they could better serve their Jewish students.

I fretted for quite awhile about it. How do you frame a presentation like this? What do you tell a group of therapists, many of whom are unfamiliar with Jews and the issues that concern us? Where do you even start?

I decided to start with early Christianity, because you can’t talk about antisemitism without highlighting the Church’s historically harsh doctrines against the Jews. Doctrines like all Jews are responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. And the Jews’ exile from Palestine is their punishment for failing to accept Christianity.

Then I jumped to the 10th and 11th centuries when the Church’s anti-Jewish doctrines hardened even more. Enter the Crusades, when Christians massacre entire Jewish communities, force hundreds of thousands of Jews to convert, and cause them to flee to Muslim lands.

It felt strange to talk about this dark history that happened so long ago, but how else could I communicate that Jewish fears about antisemitism are rooted deep in historical memory? So I proceeded through the Middle Ages, when Christian antisemitism reached its height. I described the Blood Libel, the myth that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes, and the terrible riots against the Jews that followed as a result of these accusations.

I also added in a bit about the expulsions. Jews were banished from country after country, often for economic and religious reasons. I showed them a map detailing which countries Jews fled to in which years – a colorful maze criss-crossing all over Europe.

I knew that the therapists really wanted me to help them understand why Jewish students get so nervous when their Christian roommates say they have never met a Jew. Or why taking off classes for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can be so stressful. Or the tensions on campus related to the Sconnies versus the Coasties.

But I kept going because I wanted them to understand where the stereotypes about Jews and money come from. Still in medieval Europe, local rulers and church officials pushed Jews into becoming moneylenders and tax collectors, which were socially inferior occupations. A small minority of Jews become conspicuously wealthy as a result. Hence the image of the greedy, rich, swindling Jew.

Then, the era of nationalism. European Jews become emancipated and considered equal under the law. Jews can now live and work wherever they want. But during times of rapid economic change, Jews are perceived as displacing Christians from their professions. Antisemitism now becomes political and more secular.

In the late 19th century racial antisemitism appears. Aryans are innately superior, Jews are innately inferior. Jews are polluting pure Aryan blood by intermarriage.

The therapists were very quiet. It's difficult history. But I continued.

I told them about the *Protocols of the Elders of Zionism*, a fabricated, antisemitic text published in Russia in 1903 that describes how Jews are planning global domination. It gets translated into multiple languages and is disseminated widely.

More stereotypes emerge from this: Jews are disloyal, Jews control the media.

Antisemitism enters the mainstream with World War I. How else to explain the senseless carnage? Blame it on the Jews. And the Bolshevik Revolution just proves that all Jews are Communists. They will destroy the middle class values of nation, religion, and private property.

Finally I got to slightly more familiar territory with the Holocaust. The Nazi party gains popularity and legitimacy with the economic depression of the 1930s. Drawing on centuries of Christian antisemitism, the Jews are accused of being the source of all problems facing the German people. The Nuremberg Laws define Jews by race and mandate the total separation of Aryans and Jews.

Then 1938, Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass: Nazis destroy 267 synagogues and over seven thousand Jewish-owned stores. Thirty-thousand Jewish men are rounded up. Then 1939, World War II begins: Genocide of the Jews becomes the key focus of Nazi antisemitism.

The Nazis kill six million Jews, including 1.5 million Jewish children. Two-thirds of the nine million Jews who have been living in Europe disappear.

I paused. And then I explained that an important shift occurs following World War II. Horrified by the Holocaust, the West begins to reckon with antisemitism, and it largely becomes unacceptable and shameful. In the 1960s the Catholic Church removes the historic charge that the Jews killed Christ. Also, in these decades Jews celebrate the creation of the State of Israel, which promises a refuge for Jews should antisemitism ever rear its ugly head again.

There's more to the story, I told the therapists, including antisemitism in the Arab and Muslim world and contemporary fascist movements in Europe, but I wanted to talk about the election. I told them how alarmed I was, and how alarmed their students might be, by the resurgence of antisemitism. The antisemitic trolling of Jewish journalists, Trump's tweet of Clinton superimposed on a pile of cash with a Jewish star, Trump's final campaign advertisement insinuating there is a global Jewish conspiracy.

Antisemites, I told them, have been spewing this hatred in our society all along, but Trump empowers them, gives them legitimacy, gives them a soapbox, allows them to pull these virulent antisemitic images out of the dustbin of European history.

It's this historical experience that might cause us to become upset when a neighbor makes a joke that all Jews are rich, angry when our supervisor gives us a hard time for wanting time off to celebrate a Jewish holiday, scared when a swastika appears just before Rosh Hashanah next to a synagogue.

It's this historical experience that might cause us to get frustrated when friends or co-workers or fellow activists say that antisemitism isn't real, or when they trivialize our fears and dismiss our experiences.

I think I did a decent job discussing antisemitism with the therapists. But I also knew that it wasn't the whole story. I could have continued to explain that when we learn about this persecution it's only natural that we start to believe that Jews experienced persecution at all times and in all places – the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history,” as the famous Jewish historian Salo Wittmayer Baron once wrote.

That's not the case, though. In spite of these dark periods of history, most Jews have fared pretty well. And what's more, they were able to adapt quite skillfully to the societies they lived in. The historian David Biale writes that throughout history,

...The Jews have wandered the uncertain terrain between power and powerlessness, never quite achieving the power necessary to guarantee long-term security, but equally avoiding, with a number of disastrous exceptions, the abyss of absolute impotence.
(*Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, p. 210)

How else can we understand what happened in Charlottesville last month, when white supremacists dressed in fatigues and carrying semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from a synagogue chanting the Nazi slogan, “Jews will not replace us!” while congregants removed the community’s Torahs as a precautionary measure and left through the back door.

Jewish powerlessness.

And then when President Trump makes a statement about the Neo-Nazi march, which resulted in the murder of Heather Heyer, he suggests some sort of equivalency between the white-supremacist demonstrators and the counter protesters, condemning the “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides.”

As he spoke, Gary Cohn and Steven Mnuchin, both Jews, stood by President Trump’s side.

Jewish power.

It’s a familiar story throughout history. Jews assimilate into the mainstream. Individual Jews inch towards power, and the community as a whole enjoys high levels of prosperity. But Jews as a group can still be blamed and scapegoated, shielding those at the top from the anger of those who fear they are falling towards the bottom.

So how powerful are we, really? Well, we often see ourselves as less powerful than we are, sometimes panicking that the next Kristallnacht is around the corner. Antisemites often see us as more powerful than we are, in control of the media and global levers of power. As Biale writes, “The reality...lies somewhere between Jewish fear and anti-Semitic fantasy” (p. 207).

Throw the State of Israel into the picture and the tension between power and powerlessness gets even more complex.

Morton Klein of the Zionist Organization of America isn’t the only Jew to support President Trump; a full quarter of our community voted for him. Some of my parents’ best friends voted for him. For them, Israel was central to their decision, and they are willing to turn a blind eye when antisemitism rears its head, especially if that includes criticism of the President.

But what does it mean when loyalty to our President leads us to silence? And what does it mean when Israel’s Prime Minister – who is quick to disparage any criticism of Israel from the left as antisemitism – barely responds after an actual terrifying and significant antisemitic incident? It took Benjamin Netanyahu three days to respond after the events of Charlottesville, finally making a one-line statement on Twitter, with forty characters to spare: “Outraged by expressions of anti-Semitism, neo-Nazism and racism. Everyone should oppose this hatred.”

Maybe even more concerning was when his son, Yair Netanyahu, wrote on his Facebook page that the “neo nazis scums in Virginia” may hate him, but they “belong to the past.” It’s the “thugs” of Antifa and Black Lives Matter who are the real threat.

What’s dangerous, here, is the message they are sending to Jews and non-Jews alike: this antisemitism isn’t real, it’s not dangerous. Our silence will protect us.

But I don’t think our silence will protect us. This is not the time for silence because antisemitism is real and it is dangerous.

What concerns me most is that antisemitism is the driving force of the white nationalist movement. White nationalism seeks to build a whites-only nation, and it accuses the Jews of wielding invisible power, driving white dispossession and presenting an existential threat to whiteness. Jews are an enemy race that must be eliminated. In the words of anti-racist activist Eric K. Ward, senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, who has spent almost three decades researching the movement, “Antisemitism, I discovered, is a particular and potent form of racism so central to White supremacy that Black people would not win our freedom without tearing it down” (Political Research Associates, “[Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism](#),” June 29, 2017).

It’s an argument that I find challenging, but one that I’m beginning to grasp. What’s initially puzzling is that most American Jews have white skin, have assimilated and integrated into the dominant culture, even as part of the establishment, and can hide their Jewishness and “pass” as the majority population. In just a couple generations, Jews shed their Yiddish-speaking immigrant culture, fled to the suburbs, enjoyed the decline of antisemitic attitudes from their Christian neighbors, and “became white.”

Ward isn’t saying that Ashkenazi Jews don’t enjoy white privilege, but that white nationalists see Jews as quintessentially other – and the fact that Ashkenazi Jews can blend in makes them even more of a threat.

It’s telling that the last slide in my presentation to the therapists showed graffiti of a swastika and the words, “Make American White Again.”

And yet, rising antisemitism is not the whole story. We live at a time when police officers are shooting black people on the streets with little accountability, when black people’s votes are systematically undermined, when black communities are being ripped apart through mass incarceration, when black children receive an inferior education to white children. Without comparing suffering, we should note that antisemitism is not institutionalized in the United States the way that racism is institutionalized against black people.

White Jews need to deal with white privilege and the many, many benefits that come with it. Black people have had a radically different historical experience. As Lesley Williams, a black Jew, writes, “For white Jewish Americans, the US has always been the Promised Land. Yet

African Americans know it [as] Pharaoh's Egypt." ("To Be Black and Jewish After Charlottesville," [blog post](#), August 19, 2017)

Different histories, different experiences, and different realities.

So when we consider antisemitism side by side anti-black racism, a different picture emerges. It's a picture that forces us to understand how interconnected our struggles are. It recognizes the privilege that white Jews have and also names antisemitism as a real and dangerous phenomenon. It speaks to the urgency of dealing with antisemitism and racism.

Now is when we must refuse to turn inwards, concerning ourselves only with our own needs.

Now is when we must work with others to address the persistent bigotry and hatred against all people.

Now is when we must do the difficult and complicated work of creating a multi-ethnic, multi-racial movement.

Two weeks ago, on Shabbat evening, protests erupted in St. Louis following the acquittal of a white police officer for the killing of Anthony Lamar Smith, a black suspect. In the midst of the protests, the Central Reform Congregation opened their doors to the protesters who were fleeing the police officers' tear gas to offer them sanctuary. The police reportedly surrounded the synagogue and threatened to fire tear gas at the protesters inside. That's when a white supremacist Twitter hashtag started trending: #GastheSynagogue.

This is the image that should keep us awake and night. Real and dangerous antisemitism, rooted in white nationalist hatred of Jews.

This is also the image that should give us hope for the future, Jews joining hands with people across ethnic and racial lines, developing alliances, offering support, and forming coalitions.

Yom Kippur calls us to take account of our actions, to examine them carefully, to consider how we have failed and to commit to doing better in the next year.

Yom Kippur calls us together, as a community, to learn our own history and to learn other people's history.

Yom Kippur calls us to fight for what is right and to protect the most vulnerable among us.

On this Yom Kippur, let us work for the safety of all people, let us be courageous and bold, and let us build a more just society, one rooted in respect and love and dignity.

Gmar chatimah tovah.