The Question Facing the Jewish People

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We Jews like to argue. It has been said that if you have two Jews you get three opinions. The late great Israeli novelist, Amos Oz once said, “I’m not sure I’m going to agree on everything with another member of the Jewish community, but then, on most things, I don’t agree with myself.”

Ours is the only civilization whose religious texts are literally anthologies of arguments. The patriarchs and matriarchs argued with each other; the prophets argued with God; the Talmudic scholars disputed each another. We are a people with strong views - it is part of who we are. Our diversity, culturally, religiously and in every other way, is not a weakness but a strength.

We have the courage to express our opinions. We are not afraid of going against the stream. And that is a good thing. However, when it causes us to split apart, it becomes terribly dangerous because while no empire on earth has ever been to destroy us, we have, on occasions, been able to defeat ourselves.

First, a little history. Three times we destroyed ourselves. The first was in the days of Joseph and his brothers when the Torah says, “They could no longer speak peacefully among themselves.” So, the brothers sold Joseph as a slave and eventually they all, as well as their grandchildren, ended up in bondage. The second followed the completion of the first Temple. King Solomon, its builder dies, his son takes over, and the kingdom splits in two. That was the beginning of the end of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms. When the Northern Kingdom of Israel was vanquished, we lost the ten tribes. The third was five hundred years later, during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, when the Jews besieged inside, were more focused on fighting one another than the enemy outside. The Talmud teaches that baseless hatred within the community was ultimately responsible for our fall. Those three splits caused the three great exiles of the Jewish people. The battle in the family, between brothers, took us to Egypt where we served as slaves for 400 years. The second dissent divided the house of Israel and led to the fall of both Israel in the North in 722 BCE and Judah in the south in 586 BCE. Finally, the third fall at the hands of the Romans led to 2000 years of exile. Divided we could not stand.

I do not feel like I am exaggerating, but I fear we may be in another moment of cataclysmic split. It is over one fundamental issue. As I see it, our politics, our values and support or criticism of Israel determines where we come down on this issue. So, what do you think it is? What issue is so divisive that it can pull us apart at the seams? It’s not intermarriage, to officiate or not. It’s not the Reform/Orthodox split. It’s not even the divide between cultural and religious Jews or the growing gap between some American and Israeli Jews.

This issue is so contentious, that even Rabbis today are afraid to talk about it, for fear of losing their jobs and alienating their members. Jewish civic leaders have resigned over or were forced out for taking the wrong position on this issue. I have so much respect for this congregation and my relationship with it, that I am going to talk about it, and I hope that you will hear what I have to say. So here it is. Please bear with me.
Who should Jews fear the most; the left or the right? Or perhaps, so I am more precise, the radical or extreme left or the radical or extreme right?

Some of us are terrified of the radical left. There is the anti-Semitism of BDS, Louis Farrakhan, liberal members of Congress who seek to delegitimize Israel and Jews, and elements in Black Lives Matter.

Others are more terrified of the radical or alt right, white supremacists, the Alex Jones conspirators, and elements in the anti-Globalist movement. So, which is it? Think about it: Is the greater threat from the radical left or from the radical right?

We have seen surging violence against non-whites in the United States, Europe and beyond motivated by elements of white supremacy from Anders Breivik in Norway, who killed 77 people in Norway, to Brenton Tarrant who murdered 51 Muslim worshippers in New Zealand to Patrick Crusius in El Paso, Texas. White supremacist, Dylan Roof killed nine black parishioners in South Carolina in 2015. Breivik, Roof, Tarrant all are influenced by a hate manifesto entitled, “The Great Replacement,” which asserts that whites are being replaced by non-whites. This manifesto of replacement, influenced John Earnest, who killed one woman in Poway, California and Robert Bowers who killed eleven worshippers in Pittsburgh.

On both sides of the Atlantic, white supremacy has gained new adherents due to a focus on changing demographics and increasing non-white immigration to Europe and the U.S. Some of their racist and xenophobic views are now seeping into mainstream discourse that promote the idea that immigrants and non-whites generally are a threat to Western Civilization. The normalization of hate and the support it garners allows white supremacists to bolster their belief that they are part of a global movement to “save the white race.” And how is it possible that there are “good people on both sides,” as Nazis and counterdemonstrators marched on the streets of Charlottesville?

This issue of who is to be feared came to head this July, when the current administration hoped to prove that the radical right was not to be feared and that they would defend us against, the anti-Semitic left.

And let’s be honest. Some on the radical left do have a problem with Jews and Israel. A few months ago, in Detroit, Pro-Palestinian demonstrators seized the stage of the National L.G.B.T.Q. conference, and demanded a boycott of Israel. “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” they chanted. They were met with sustained applause by the audience. Conference organizers did nothing to stop the disruption or to disavow the demonstrators.

Tyler Gregory, the Jewish executive directory of A Wider Bridge, a North American L.G.B.T.Q. organization was not surprised by the turn against Jews. In 2016, his group hosted a reception in Chicago. The event was mobbed by some two hundred aggressive demonstrators and Gregory and his audience had to barricade themselves in their room while those outside were harassed. He condemned intersectionality, which links oppression of one group to another. He wrote cynically, “As Jews we were denied our safe space. We were denied our place in a movement that fights bigotry.”

Radical Left anti-Semites have also burst into Congress, largely as a result of the election of Representatives, one from the disputed territories and the other from Somalia. Both women support boycotts of Israel but no other country; not Somalia where unspeakable horrors have occurred, or Syria, were half a million civilians have been killed by the government, not China or North Korea. Just Israel. Both have also written tweets with distinctly anti-Semitic undertones.
When a Senate bill that included anti-BDS measures came up for a vote, progressives tried to block it, ostensibly on free-speech grounds. Those same progressives opposed the claims of free speech present in the case of the Colorado baker who refused to make a cake for a gay couple.

So, I return to my question: Who should Jews fear the most; the radical left or the radical right?

In the words of conservative columnist, Jonathan Tobin, who recently spoke from this pulpit, “In recent years how you answer that question of “who hates us more” tended to be a function of your politics more than anything else. For Liberals, anti-Semitism was the work of the far right ... for conservatives it was just the opposite.” He wrote, “Jews are divided on many issues, but there is probably no more self-defeating argument in contemporary Jewish life than the question of which types of anti-Semites are most to be feared.”

All of this anxiety is making us turn not only against our political enemies but more significantly against each other. We have marriages in this congregation that are on the rocks over politics. We have friends who will not go out with each other because of this issue. We have emails, tweets and Facebook posts that are turning long time friends against each other.

A few years ago, Laurie and I went to Germany following our congregational trip to Poland and Israel. We were steeped in Holocaust history. We visited the Concentration Camps of both Poland and German. But the hate was not just historic. We saw anti-Israel graffiti written by the radical right and antifa activists. When I asked our guide, who ironically was Israeli, who he fears the most today; was it from the left or the right, the Muslim community or the far-right elements – he answered clearly “Both.”

During the first half of the 20th century, Jews were equally squeezed from both the radial right and left. The communists were putting Jews in Gulags. The winter of 1953, was especially dark and ominous. Stalin fabricated a conspiracy that Jewish physicians conspired to murder Kremlin officials. It became known as the “Doctor’s Plot.” By the end of February, Jews across the country believed in the imminence of a pogrom that would murder thousands, and exile the survivors to concentration camps in the Soviet Far East. There were arrests. Jews were dismissed from their jobs. They were insulted on the streets, in shops, and on public transportation. Some just disappeared.

Just a few years earlier the Jews of Western Europe were decimated. This time, it came from the radical right, Nazism. It started with words, led to boycotts, protests, arrests, ghettos and death camps. One might ask, who was worse, Stalin or Hitler? While Hitler clearly was worse. Both were enemies of our people.

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Hate is taking a toll on Jews – not just from without, which is very real, but from within. Listen to these words recently written from the Jewish right, attacking the left. In an article entitled, “Left wing Jews: a Jewish and American tragedy” the writer says: “It is probably impossible to overstate the damage left wing – not liberal but left wing – Jews are doing to Judaism, Jews and America ... This damage is not new ... I think George Soros is a malevolent force ... whatever the left touches it ultimately ruins.” Now listen to the other side from the left about the dangers of the
right. “We should lobby the U.S. government to exempt settler goods from its free trade deal with Israel. We should push to end IRS policies that allow Americans to make tax-deductible gifts to charities that fund settlements ... then we should stop buying those products. When the partisans of non-democratic Israel visit Jewish America, they should be met with protests.” That same writer tells the world that Israel gets American economic support because, “Jewish leaders in both Israel and the U.S. encase Israel’s actions in a fog of euphemism and lies.” So, who is it from the left who is calling for boycotts and protests against Israel? Calling us “liars?” Peter Beinart! And who from the right is spewing forth classic anti-Semitic warnings about the destructive nature of the Jewish left? Dennis Prager! Beinart and Prager are two of the brightest, most knowledgeable, most committed Jews writing in America today. And while so many have turned against us, they are imploring us to turn against each other.

Remember the story we commemorate on these last days of Pesach? The Jews are approaching the Red Sea and see the waters swirling before them. God tells them to have no fear. So, we go into the midst of the Sea, and then the Torah tells us: “V’hamayim lahem chomah – the waters were like a wall.” “Mi’y’iminom u’mi’ismolom – on their right and on their left.” But here, the word for wall, “chomah” is not spelled as it usually is with a “vo.” The rabbis tell us: read this not as “chomah” - “wall,” but rather “cheimah” - “hatred.” The rabbis are speaking prophetically when they tell us that down through history, hatred is going to come both from the right and from the left. Our Jewish people will survive by walking together through the midst of the Sea.

One of my favorite lines from our prayer book is about this very scene at the red sea. It reads, “There is no way to get from here to there, except by joining hands and marching together.”

Yes, sometimes it’s the right ... and sometimes it’s the left ... and sometimes it’s both! I feel squeezed in the middle as if I am walking through the red sea with what feels like hatred all around me. I am terrified of white nationalists, chanting “Jews will not replace us,” who attack our synagogues and force us to turn our beloved shul into a fortress. They wrap themselves in the flag and say that our enemy is the globalist, often code for the Jews. I am also terrified of Islamic extremism that turns against the Jewish community calling for our death. I am terrified of the radical left who believe that we have no commonality with social justice causes because we are defenders of the state of Israel.

I find it amazing that we can draw such animus from both extremes, but then again, anti-Semitism has no reason.

I saw a glimmer of hope this summer. I think we can all agree that there is dysfunction in Washington, even if there is disagreement as to why. But the House voted 298-17 on a non-binding resolution condemning BDS, which stands for Boycott, Divest and Sanction Israel. Some may focus on the 17. I prefer to focus on the 398 and the fact that there were almost the exact same number of Republicans and Democrats cosponsors. Both parties rose above partisan politics on this very important issue to send a clarion call, a call I hope we can all hear.

Our rabbis in the Talmud taught, that after the exodus from Egypt the Jews thought they were free at last, only to discover that Pharaoh and his army are in hot pursuit. The Bible describes the reactions of the Jews in one sentence: “And when Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them; greatly frightened the Israelites cried out to God.” The Hebrew word, “hikriv” in this passage is translated, “drew near,” but the correct translation is: “caused to draw near.” And in fact, that is the way the rabbis read it. Our ancestors taught that in times of crisis we must draw near to one another. “Rabbi Berachiah comments, the coming near of Pharaoh did more to bring the Israelites closer to God and one another than 100 fasts and prayers.” We need to learn from our tradition; a time of crisis must be a time of unity.
That is my prayer tonight. Let us draw near to one another. We need to turn a page. Yes, there are anti-Semites around us. But the result must not be us turning on each other. Both the radical right and the radical left are to be feared, but for different reasons.

Following services,... talk about this issue and when you are done,... remember that we need to stand together not only for our safety, but also for our sanity. Think about the person with whom you are speaking and try to find the language of love. See if there is a way to hear and be heard without irrational hatred weighing us down. Know that we can be unified, and that in that unity, we can be stronger than hate.