Yom Kippur Sermon 5781 | September 2020
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Everyone wants to be the Jews

We all aware that there has been an alarming increase of antisemitism worldwide and in the United States. It ranges from chants of “Jews will not replace us” to challenges to the right of Israel to exist.

My friends, I want to speak about anti-Semitism, from a different perspective. My supposition this morning, I suggest with humility and with the expectation that some of you will not agree. I ask you to listen with an open mind, for the role of a rabbi is to challenge the status quo and make us think. My rabbis challenged me, and I now, in turn hope to do so this morning.

Here is my supposition: Deep down inside, many of those who hate us, do so because they begrudgingly respect us, even if they are not consciously aware of it. Some anti-Semites believe that they are the true Israel and we are merely imposters. When I told my daughter, Ricca, what I was speaking about she said, “So they hate us because they ain’t us.” In essence, yes. It doesn’t make anti-Semitism easier to accept, but it explains some of the strangeness of the words coming from Eagles wide receiver, Desean Jackson, Nation of Islam minister, Louis Farrakhan and others. I will speak about them shortly.

Respect for us does not always lead to anti-Semitism. In fact, the founders of America had a positive respect for us and there was little contempt for the Jewish people in colonial America.

A wonderful book by Yale professor, Philip Goski writes, “Americas founders saw their own state as very much in the mirror of the Exodus. They were self-conscious about establishing covenants, (in Biblical terms.) They’d open a church; it was a covenant. They founded a town; it was a covenant. Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah’s call for justice and liberty, was translated into the Puritan cry for reform that later became the patriot call for revolution.” On July 4, 1776, the US declared its independence, and the Continental Congress named Franklin and future presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to form a committee to design a Great Seal.

If Ben Franklin had had his way, the United States Great Seal would have featured Moses leading the people through the Red Sea, instead of a bald eagle. Franklin’s design, described in a handwritten note, “alluded to ‘Moses standing on the shore, and extending his hand over the sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open chariot, crown on his head and a sword in his
hand.” For Franklin, Pharaoh was King George. The Red Sea was the Atlantic Ocean and the revolutionaries were the new Israel.

The Liberty bell, which sits outside Independence hall, is so called because it has inscribed on it, a line from Leviticus, “Proclaim liberty thought-out the land to all the inhabitants thereof.” Why did this line find itself on the bell? It was because the Jubilee, year, which is referenced in Leviticus, was about giving freedom to the enslaved and releasing the poor from the shackles of impoverishment. Leviticus teaches that everyone was entitled to land, life and liberty, so the Jubilee year was instituted in Biblical times, giving freedom to the poor from their debts and the return of lost property to them every Jubilee or fifty years. The founders of America were enthralled by this idea.

How many of you knew the great respect our founders had for us as Jews? Even as I speak with you, it makes me grateful and proud.

One more example of this respect for our culture. Yale’s coat of arms, or as my grandfather might have probably called it, “Yaleh”, has the words, “Urim and Thumim,” on them. These Hebrew words mean “light and purity.” This is in reference to the breast plate of the Biblical High Priests, who used them to offer rulings based on the principles of light and purity.

If we look earlier in history, we learn that others had a more complicated relationship with us. The relationship today between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church is strong. One of the most important roles I fulfill is to strengthen at the local level our relationships with other faiths, including the Catholic community. I think of Monsignor McHenry and feel blessed that we can call him a Jewish ally. Recently Pope Francis said, “The habit of persecuting Jews is beginning to be reborn,” “Brothers and sisters: this is neither humane nor Christian; the Jews are our brothers and sisters and must not be persecuted! Understood?” Every year we invite Catholic Educators to Beth Or in conjunction with the ADL where together we learn about Jewish practices and history. I am continually amazed by their respect and desire to build bridges between our faiths.

But the history between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people was not as strong as it is today. The early Catholic church respected our covenant with God, yet condemned us for not affirming their new faith. They reviled us but needed us for theological reasons. As early as the fourth century, the Catholic church confirmed what we had stated for years, namely that God chose the Jewish people to uphold the covenant established by God through Moses. But the church then went on to deny our place in the religious world, arguing that, because we rejected their new religious tenets, we went onto the off-road of history and that they, specifically the Catholic apostolic church, subsequently became the New Israel. Seeing themselves as newly elect, they designed the Sistine chapel in the Vatican to mirror the exact proportions of the ancient Temple in Israel. Rome was seen as the new Jerusalem.
And, of course, the New Testament, a reference to the Gospels and the epistles, was meant to replace the Hebrew Bible or the Old testament.

The early papal leaders understood that in order for the New testament to be true, then they must affirm the truths of the old testament while moving beyond it. Later, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 877, it reads that the church is itself the New Israel. This idea, happily repudiated by the church today, is called supercessionism. But the fact remains that, for years, the church believed that Jews were once covenanted but now spurned and that a new covenant or testament was given, making Christians the new Israel. This explains much of the anti-Semitism that came from the church.

Islam also believes that their early founders had Jewish authority. The Islamic holiday, *Qurbani Id* (or *Id Al-Adha*), is known as the “Sacrifice Festival.” Muslims celebrate this “great feast of sacrifice” on the tenth day of the last month of the Muslim year. This day celebrates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son *Ishmael on Mount Moriah*. They tell this story based on the parashah that we read on Rosh Hashanah about the sacrifice of Isaac, not Ishmael.

Although the Koran does not name the child whom Abraham was to sacrifice, Muslims believe it was Ishmael, as taught by the Koran. One Muslim scholar, after citing a number of texts from the Koran, concludes: “It is quite clear that Ishmael was the son to be sacrificed and not Isaac. In other words, the scholar and others have argued that the Bible, though much older than the Koran, had corrupted the story, erasing the real hero, who was Ishmael. From this perspective, the Jews have usurped Islamic power by saying that we are descendants of Abraham, when in fact, according to the Koran, it is the Islamic community who are the true elect.

Tremendous conflict resulted from this divergence of opinion, because Ishmael became the father of Islam, while Isaac became the Jewish patriarch. So, who was God’s beloved son? It’s as if both communities fought for recognition as the sole beloved son of Abraham. Just as an aside, even the Christians weigh in on this debate, stating that the only begotten, beloved son, to be sacrificed was neither Isaac nor Ishmael, but Jesus. Much of the conflict that Israel has with her Arab neighbors has less to do with land and more to do with faith, and the question of “who is God’s beloved?” That’s what makes this conflict so difficult.

Now Louis Farrakhan, minister of the Nation of Islam, says that blacks are the true Hebrews and that we are merely imposters. This message is very similar to that of the church’s belief in supercessionism. Desean Jackson and Nick Cannon echoed Farrakhan’s belief. In a quote Jackson wrongly associated with Hitler, he said, “the white Jews knows that the (Blacks) are the real Children of Israel and to keep America’s secret, the Jews will blackmail America. They will extort America, their plan
for world domination won’t work if the (Blacks) know who they were. The white citizens of America will be terrified to know that all this time they’ve been mistreating and discriminating and lynching the Children of Israel.”

Then it got even uglier. The NAACP Philadelphia director, Rodney Muhammad posted on Twitter a caricature of a Jewish man wearing a yarmulke and pressing a large, bejeweled hand down on a faceless mass of people. Similar caricatures trace back to before the Holocaust, and were often used to depict Jews as a force of greed and oppression. Next to the image was a quote falsely attributed to French philosopher Voltaire: “To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize.” It is horrible lie and also quite terrifying that it is gaining traction in many communities.

In their thinking, they are new chosen people in the New world, that replace the chosen people, us, from the old world. Farrakhan and others believe that as the Jews were chosen for suffering and exile years ago, so the Black community is the new chosen people, singled out, more than the Jews, for suffering, exile and enslavement. In earlier days, musical spirituals drew parallels between the Jews and the blacks as they fought against slavery. Now, some, clearly not all, have gone one step further, saying not that they are like the Jews, but that they are the Jews and that we are imposters and oppressors.

Before I continue, it important for me to say that, while the hatred from Farrakhan and his followers is nothing less than deplorable, let us not forget how many African American leaders, especially Pastor Quann have condemned him and his hatred. In the toxicity of social media, we are more likely to see the hatred than the condemnations of it. Our friends at Bethlehem have said publicly that they stand with us against anti-Semitism. Happily, the national NAACP took action to remove the NAACP’s Philadelphia Director.

Why do so many people hate us and at the same time in a perverse way want to be us? Why do so many faiths and peoples see their story as a retelling of our story? I humbly believe that it is because we are a unique people with an amazing story of courage, faith and defiance against oppression. We are chosen to bear witness to God in the face of doubt, goodness in the face of evil, strength in the face of weakness and hope in the midst of despair. We overcame powerful forces of evil beginning with Pharaoh and became a model for the courage to overthrow tyranny.

As we fight anti-Semitism, let us understand what it truly is. Some will say it’s roots lie in our success. Can’t be. Other religious communities are more successful than us and are not hated like us.

Others see it in the fact that we are accused of deicide. Also not true. Much hatred has nothing to do with faith.
Others say, it’s because we refuse to assimilate, to accept the norms of society. Also, I don’t accept this. The Amish are far more separatists than we are, and they are not hated to the degree that we are.

Others take a more Freudian perspective. “In the eyes of the anti-Semite,” Bari Weiss, who previously wrote for the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and the Tablet and is the author of the award-winning book How to Fight Antisemitism, writes “the Jew is ... everything.” It is not the actual Jew that most anti-Semites hate (many of them have never met one) but what the haters project onto him. “The Jew is whatever the anti-Semite needs him to be.” What we find reprehensible in ourselves and can’t confront, we project onto the Jew. Weiss notes, antisemitism “turns Jews into the symbol of whatever a given civilization defines as its most sinister and threatening qualities” – be it atheism, fundamentalism, cosmopolitanism, tribalism or all of them at once. This is compelling argument.

But maybe, some hate us because they see something powerful, compelling, and faithful in us. They see in us a faith that has stood the test of time and that is affirmed by every faith in the West. Christians may disagree with Muslims on their faith. Muslims may disagree with Christians as to the divinity of their savior. But if both of their faiths are to survive, each must agree that we are the chosen people. If we are not, and they came from us, then their faith is hollow. So even as some hate us, they without awareness begrudgingly respect us. Even as they seek to undermine us, they see in us something undying. So let us never cower, let us never waver, let us never falter. Maybe we can see this idea, that each of the communities mentioned see in their anti-Semitism a form of flattery.

Now, I want to share with you some compelling words stated by Bari Weiss. Ask 3 Jews their opinion of Bari Weiss and we probably will end up with 4 opinions. But I hope we all can appreciate the courage and inspiration in her words:

I am a proud American. I am a proud New Yorker. And I am a proud Jew.

I am not a Jew because people hate my religion, my people, and my civilization. Not for a single moment does Jew-hatred, like the kind we are seeing in this city, make me a Jew.

I am a Jew because of the audacity and the iconoclasm of Abraham, the first Jew of all. The whole world was awash in idols and he stood alone to proclaim the truth: There is one God.

I am a Jew because my ancestors were slaves. And I am a Jew because the story of their Exodus from Egypt, their liberation from slavery, is a story that changed human consciousness forever.

I am a Jew because our God commands us to never oppress the stranger.

I am Jew because Ruth, the first convert to Judaism, told her mother-in-law Naomi, “your people will be my people and your God will be my God,” reminding us of the centrality of the Jewish people to Judaism.
I am a Jew because of Queen Esther, who understood that she had attained her royal position in order to save her people from destruction.

I am a Jew because the Maccabees were the original resistance. Because they modeled for us—and for all peoples—how to resist the temptation of self-erasure.

I am a Jew because even after the heart of Judaism and Jewish sovereignty were destroyed my people refused to accept the logic of history and disappear. And I am a Jew because some of our greatest renewals took place in exile.

I am a Jew because my people has been targeted and despised and murdered by the Nazis and Soviets.

I am a Jew because evil hates my people.

I am a Jew because my people managed to turn destruction into redemption by returning to their land after 2,000 years.

I am a Jew because of students across this country who refuse to be smeared and denigrated because of who they are, who are standing up against humiliation, pressure and abuse to affirm the justness of Zionism.

I am a Jew because my brothers and sisters in England and France are battling the anti-Semitism of populist thugs and the anti-Semitism of politicians in parliament.

I am a Jew because Jews are of every color and class and politics and language. And I am a Jew because hatred of us has no color or class or politics or language.

I am a Jew because Jews do not cause Jew hatred. Ever.

Today, as in so many times in history, there are many forces in the world insisting that Jews must disappear or die. Some say it bluntly. Some cloak it in the language of progress.

But I am a Jew because of I know that there is force far greater than that. And that is the force of who we are and the force of our world-changing ideas.

The Jewish people were not put on Earth to be anti-anti-Semites. We were put on Earth to be Jews.

We are the people whose God never slumbers or sleeps, and so neither can we.

We are the lamp-lighters.

We are the ever-dying people that refuses to die.

The people of Israel lives now and forever.

Am Yisrael Chai.

How right she is. Israel lives.
Yes, Israel lives and must live. But I believe Am Yisrael Chai means more than that. It speaks to our connection to each other as a Jewish people and the pride we have earned by the accomplishments and contributions of our people.

My friends, let us be proud of who we are. Let us proudly stand up and celebrate who we are. And let us see in other’s people’s contempt for us, a dream of reformulating our ancient story. Let us proudly stand up and celebrate who we are by supporting our synagogues, Jewish charities and Israel. As we see Covid challenges and the inability to congregate together, let us light shabbat candles and make kiddish at home. Wave the lulav and etrog on Succot, eat Matza and no bread on Passover, read Torah on Shabbat. Let us go to Israelbonds.com and buy our bonds and stand with the State of Israel. Let us be proud, defiant, resolute, and faithful. Let us stand up for social justice. Let us never shirk our responsibilities. Our task is to be the lamplighter. To hold the torch and to say, now and forever, Am Yisrael Chai, “The people of Israel lives.”

Please be safe during these challenging time and I hope next year it will be safe for us to be together in our synagogue. Even though I cannot see you today, I feel our connection. Nothing can or will break our connection.