

Antisemitism Is a Hatred that Never Dies

Parashat Vayehi 5784

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I begin this morning with a confession: I was not prepared for this. I have been doing this job long enough to pretty much know what I am doing, but the Jewish communal environment in which we find ourselves is very different from the one I was told to expect; our challenges are not necessarily the challenges I was trained to confront.

I was a freshman in college in the fall of 1993, when Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat had their famous handshake at the White House. I remember the suicide bombings that followed. I remember the Purim Massacre against Muslim worshippers in Hebron. I remember the protests against Rabin's government. And I remember every time an extremist threatened to derail the process, the determination to stay the course. We believed we were on the cusp of a negotiated agreement to end the conflict and change the course of history.

In the 1990s, it felt as though we were entering a post-antisemitic era. I remember the Rosh Hashanah sermon the year the 1990 Jewish Population Study came out with the statistic that the intermarriage rate had surpassed 50%. My rabbi preached on that Rosh Hashanah that it was time to start worrying. We no longer needed to fear the Jew *haters*, he suggested. But we had better start worrying that America might come to *love us* to death. The buzzword for the generation was "Jewish continuity."

That was basically my message when I was invited, shortly after I returned home from my first year as an undergraduate, to address a special service for the graduating high school seniors at my synagogue. I told them to be sure to take advantage of all the benefits of the college experience (including the freedoms of living outside our parents' homes), but to remember to save time to celebrate and nurture Jewish identity. I touted a word I had learned during my first semester: "multiculturalism." We didn't need to just "fit in" on campus. America was ready to accept us and celebrate diversity. "Multiculturalism" seemed to me a secular way of saying "holiness." In Judaism, "holiness" means "distinction. The metaphor of the Melting Pot had been replaced by the Salad Bowl. It was time to celebrate being different. Nurture our unique identity. Be proud.

For a sociology class, I studied the Anti-Defamation League. I don't remember all the details, but my presentation showed how ADL was reinventing itself because antisemitism no longer seemed a serious enough problem for such a robust organization. ADL had launched its World of Difference curriculum, which applied lessons learned fighting antisemitism to address racism and other more universal forms of hatred.

It seems naïve now to remember how we thought the world's oldest hatred would disappear. But I think about those times as I read the conclusion of today's Torah portion. Joseph has made it to the top of Egyptian society. Jacob has come down to meet him there. The family is reunited. Jacob meets Joseph's two sons – Menasse, "כי נשני אלהים את כל עמלי," for God has made me forget completely the hardships in my parental home;" and Ephraim, "כי הפרני אלהים בארץ עניי," for God has allowed me to prosper in the land of my affliction." Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical version of the story ends here.

But the Torah portion ends, the book ends 80 years later. Joseph is still in Egypt, but he has come to recognize that he doesn't belong. He tells his brothers that a time will come when they will need to leave the Land of Egypt; and he makes them swear that when that moment arrives, they must remove his bones and transport them to their homeland in the Land of Israel.

Next week we will see how quickly the "othering" of Israel is accomplished. Pharaoh and his cronies will come to feel threatened by the growth of the Israelite people. The Egyptians will enact measures to curb the numbers of Israelites. Israel will be enslaved. Because that's how antisemitism works. The majority responds to its fears by pointing to one group. "Othering" may seem innocuous at first, like what the proverbial frog feels when the water begins to heat up. Hatred becomes normalized.

We feel it today. The State of Israel was established to protect Jews against hatred, but now it is the target. One nation is singled out among all the others. One nation is told their actions and abuses are so egregious as to call its legitimacy to question. An entire people is deemed responsible for the actions of a sovereign government 5,000 miles away. And intellectual leaders find justification in the "context."

The warning signs are there, even if I didn't quite see it coming. And the question now is: how do we respond?

For starters, we need to embrace Judaism and Jewish identity without fear. In the last verse of our portion, we read: "Joseph died at the age of 110 years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin Egypt." It is curious that just four verses earlier, we read that Joseph lived to be 110 years old. Why is his age repeated twice in such a short text? A commentary called *Shaar Bat Rabim*, about which I know very little, suggests that the key point in that last verse is not the number. The key point is that Joseph died as Joseph in Egypt. He didn't die as Tzafeth Paneah, the Egyptian name Pharaoh had bestowed upon him. Even as a powerful viceroy, Joseph never forgot that he was Joseph. Joseph lived and died as a Hebrew.

A midrash suggests that the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt on account of four *mitzvot*: they did not violate sexual norms, they did not gossip, they did not change their names, and they did not change their language. In other words, the Israelites were redeemed

from Egypt because, in spite of all the hardships, in spite of all the incentives to just mix in, they never forgot or abandoned their uniquely distinctive identity.

We know from centuries of experience that assimilation is not an effective tool against antisemitism. This moment calls upon us to embrace Jewish identity, double down on Jewish education, celebrate Jewish life, and support our Jewish communal institutions. We must hold America accountable to its multicultural ideal of *e pluribus unum* – many peoples, many cultures, celebrated for their diverse cultures and contributions, and united across difference. We need not, we dare not sacrifice Jewish identity or observance to participate fully in American life.

And we must support each other. Be sure to check out the antisemitism resources on our website, which will be updated often. And resist the polarization trap. It is foolish to imagine that one political party or the other might have a monopoly on fighting Jew hatred or protecting Israel. We cannot view antisemitism through the same partisan lenses with which we view most everything else. We need not debate whether antisemitism is worse when it comes from extreme nationalists on the right or from extreme social dogmatists on the left. Democrats should be Democrats and Republicans should be Republicans, and Jews must be united as Jews. Our small Jewish community cannot afford to divide itself along partisan lines. Vote for whichever party you favor, and then hold both parties accountable. On the issue of Jewish safety and survival issue there can be no division. We are one people with one heart, *am echad im lev echad*.

As Joseph did in Egypt, we must thank God for the blessings afforded us by this great country even as we recognize the threats of a Jew hatred that doesn't die. Let us **celebrate** the diversity of peoples in this land and the diversity of opinion within our community, lest we become **victims** of bitter divisions. Let us be vigilant and aware, and also courageous and proud, that the blessing that concluded our Torah reading today might ring true: "*Hazak Hazak v'Nithazek!* Let us be strong in our convictions. Let us be strong in our identity. Let us strengthen one another as members of the Israelite nation that lives - *Am Yisrael Chai.*" Shabbat Shalom.

