

**Shabbat Shlach Lcha 5781**  
**June 4, 2021/25 Sivan 5781**  
**Reflections on Antisemitism**

Shabbat Shalom!

In any given week, I will do two things to begin preparing for my speaking and teaching at services. First, naturally, I will look at the Torah portion and holiday cycle and see if there are compelling pieces that I want to lift up. And second, I will reflect on various current events: what's happening in our community and country, what's happening in Israel, and what may have happened historically at this season.

Let me take a moment, before I speak a bit more formally, to share with you this process.

The Torah portion this week, *Shlach Lcha*, contains one of the most poignant images, certainly in the last three books of Torah. It's set near the end of the 40 years of wandering from Egypt to Israel and describes Moses sending out a group of scouts to explore the land of Israel. Two groups of scouts return and deliver reports...with the same information but radically different perspectives. The one group is pessimistic about our chances for survival while the second group, made up of Joshua and Caleb, deliver an optimistic report, that while there are formidable challenges ahead, we will be able to overcome them because of our relationship with God. It's a

portion that lifts up the importance of faith and the importance of not succumbing to negativity.

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What's happening in the world right now?

This was one of the most consequential weeks in the history of Israel, with dramatic changes in both the presidency and the prime ministership. Combined with the fighting last month, we are witnessing incredibly important developments that will impact Israel for many years to come.

In this week, we have continued to see tragic gun violence, both locally and in places around the country.

In this week, we have continued to witness bitter polarization between those with different political views, here in Brighton and across the community.

In this week, we have continued to see the consequences of systemic racism.

Any one of these begs our attention. Any one of these realities demands that we think together and take action together, to create a more peaceful, more united, and more just world.

And, oh, by the way, this Shabbat is the first time in 15 months that we are holding Friday night services in person. Full stop, that is a moment that is incredibly significant.

[We consecrate this moment with a blessing. Join me in the Shehechianu]

And and and...I add to this report the acknowledgement that in this week, we have continued to see antisemitism rise, with threats, violence, and a deterioration in the sense of safety and equality that so many have felt for so long.

And this must be addressed.

I share all of this by way of setting expectations. First, know that if there are subjects I don't address tonight...or at any particular moment...it's not because I'm not concerned. Rather, it's because of my attitude that we can't do it all and we need to focus our attention in meaningful ways, in order to be effective in making change.

Second, in terms of expectations, I hope that my remarks tonight are the beginning of a conversation. This is not meant to be a comprehensive presentation in any way, and I look forward to our continuing reflection and action together.

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I want to offer a few words from one of the most important scholars addressing antisemitism, Deborah Lipstadt.

In her 2019 book, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, Lipstadt offer this thought: “While there seems to have been a decided increase in both physical acts and rhetorical expressions of antisemitism in recent years, our conversation should not be rooted in or motivated by numbers or by antisemitic acts. This would suggest that, if the numbers decrease, our worries should abate.”

She adds this: “What should alarm us is that human beings continue to believe in a conspiracy that demonizes Jews and sees them as responsible for evil.”

In the ancient world, the Jewish people lived as a separate nation, both independent in the land of Israel and in other places such as Egypt.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the reality for the Jewish people became one of diaspora...we have lived for the last two thousand years in virtually every country of the world. In virtually none of these places have we been full and equal citizens.

There has been a cycle of golden age and destruction, repeated over and over again.

In the twentieth century, this pattern began to break in two ways. One, of course, was the founding of Israel as an independent Jewish state. And the second has been the extraordinary level of integration of Jews in America.

Ironically, these two emerge with opposite impacts. The independent state of Israel has reinforced the notion of Judaism as a national identity. Israel in part thrives because the Jews all over the world have a connection, however they choose to cultivate it, and an automatic right to citizenship.

At the same time, Jewish life in the United States has diminished the concept of national identity. Overwhelmingly, we see ourselves as American. Jewish is one of several adjectives that define us. Very few of us see Jewish as the noun, the primary identifier of who we are. Judaism has developed—diminished? —into a part of our cultural identity. For many, it is an optional, extra-curricular activity.

That lament may sound harsh, but I offer it because of the concern I feel about what the future may hold. What will the future be if we continue this pattern?

And yet, here we are, at a moment where antisemitism is rising, without concern for how one lives or practices their Judaism. Most are familiar with the reality that in Nazi Germany, the catastrophic antisemitism made no distinction between religious or secular Jews, no distinction between the myriad of choices made by the European Jews. It was, of course, an attempt to exterminate all the Jews, no matter who they were.

Antisemitism has never disappeared. The recent events in the news are not new. While I don't believe we can draw a parallel

to the early Nazi era, I do believe we must recognize that the threat is real.

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Many of you know that over the last couple of weeks, I did an informal survey, and I thank those of you who contributed responses. I asked you to complete the sentence, "Antisemitism will end when..."

Your answers reinforced my instinct and some of the other learning that I've done. Your answers fell into two categories. Many of you, in one way or another, answered that antisemitism will never end...or it will only end if there are no more Jews in the world...as a result, we need to remain vigilant, protecting ourselves and working to ensure that small acts of hatred don't grow into larger events of violence.

The second category of responses, also taking quite seriously the reality of antisemitism, focused on the possibility of antisemitism ending when we succeed in linking together all the oppressed and discriminated against groups.

I don't know if there is a way, or even a necessity, in marrying together these two different worldviews. I do believe that there are two critical pieces of how we can respond to the realities of today's world.

First, I would suggest that we need to answer antisemitism with Jewish pride. Even when we live assimilated lives, we can demonstrate that Judaism is an important part of who we are...whether it centers on ritual, culture, scholarship, or ethics, we can work to celebrate our Jewish identity and make explicitly Jewish contributions to the community. Judaism teaches us to give tzedakah and pursue justice. Judaism elevates the roles of scholars, scientists, inventors, and more. Judaism is responsible for beautiful music and literature and art.

The world is better because of the presence of Judaism. I want us to shine a light on this any way we can.

A second thought I offer tonight is that we combat antisemitism through the relationships we build. Do we have open and honest connections to elected officials? Do we have genuine communication with people of different races and different religions? Do we have people in our lives with different political views, different economic realities, and different levels of education?

The only way we can change the world is through relationships. Especially in our dramatically segregated city and country, there is a woeful lack of true connection to people who are different than us.

This works in both directions...I believe antisemitism will diminish when there are stronger connections between Jews

and non-Jews. And, I believe it is only when we have those connections that we will be able to understand and respond to racism in our country.

I do want to offer just a word about Israel. I will say this as clearly as I can. First, anti-Israel sentiment often crosses over into antisemitism. We can vigorously disagree with the policies and actions of Israel without being antisemitic, in the same way that we can strongly disagree with policies and actions of the United States and still be patriotic Americans. However, when one denies the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state, it is an insidious and gravely concerning path.

The second piece in terms of Israel for now is this: I strongly believe that one can be a Zionist and a supporter of the rights and dignity of the Palestinians. In shorthand, we often refer to this as the two-state solution: that peace will come when there is an independent Palestine alongside an independent Israel. Naturally, the challenge is in the specifics, but the fundamental principle should not be questioned. Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state, in our ancient and forever home, and Palestine also has a right to a home in that same space between the river and the sea.

If Israel's legitimacy is questioned or denied, then we must respond in the strongest terms possible. Tragically, this denial has come from some involved in the fight for racial justice in this country. This is where the relationships are of the utmost



importance...do we have the ability to talk openly and honestly with people who trust and respect us?

I began with the observation that current events have given us several compelling topics that all demand our attention. It's almost too much, but we can keep working and doing the best we can. My hope is that we commit ourselves to continuing to share with one another, working to hear and understand different perspectives. While it's not a simple equation, I believe that we will diminish antisemitism and hatred when we work on the three things I've raised tonight. Let us cultivate Jewish pride, enter into diverse and deep relationships, and not hesitate from drawing a firm line whenever there are questions of legitimacy.

There is a beautiful spiritual tradition about Shabbat that says each of us is filled with a *neshama yiterah*, an additional soul, each week on Shabbat. I pray that as we gather tonight and enjoy this sacred, soulful day, we will find ourselves fortified to combat hate and create peace in our world. Just as the ancient scouts Joshua and Caleb were able to see through the danger and identify a path to safety, let us be our souls be filled with confidence, optimism, and vision as we do the work of *tikkun olam*, healing and perfecting the world.

Shabbat Shalom!