

The Antidote to Anti-Semitism: Live As a Jew!

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Kol Nidre 2002/5763*

Most of us here tonight are probably too young to recall a year like the one we have just experienced. After the liquidation of Jewish life in Europe, and the annihilation of six million Jews, the Jewish people displayed an amazing resiliency and tenacity, defying all expectations, by refusing to disappear from the annals of history.

Yet equally surprising, just one generation after the destruction of the European Jewish community, anti-semitism, is rampant throughout the world, especially in Europe and the Arab and Moslem nations. It is surprising because in the shadow of the Holocaust, we enjoyed a period in which such bigotry was repudiated and viewed as repugnant and unfashionable.

Yet today, anti Jewish sentiment knows no bounds, and is prevalent in many respectable quarters around the world. It is the bedrock of communist countries and atheistic regimes alike, uniting Moslem fundamentalists and neo-Nazis, intellectuals on the left and barbarians on the right. Not only is it no longer unfashionable to express anti-semitic comments, it is now down right fashionable. A conversation at a dinner party in London of European diplomatic types and others this past spring was peppered with the comment by France's ambassador to England attributing all the troubles in the world to that (expletive deleted) little country, Israel. He was neither recalled, nor rebuked by his government.

It seems that no international colloquium can be held without Palestinians and Arabs hijacking the forum and turning it into a festschrift of hate and seizing the opportunity to either slander or exclude Israel. Last year's United Nations sponsored conference on racism in Durban, South Africa was turned into a conference of racism against Israel and the Jewish people. Taking place a week before September 11th, the horrifying events of that tragic day overshadowed the deliberations, but the conference against racism actually foreshadowed September 11.

Events spiraled downhill from there.

Despite protestations to the contrary, attempts to cloak good old fashioned anti-Semitism in the mask of protesting Israel's policies is transparent. When Israel is singled out among all the nations of the world for the kind of criticism it faces, it is anti-Semitism, and must be identified as such. It is the only country in the world which is condemned for defending itself. A defining characteristic of the new anti-semitism denies that Jews are victims of Palestinian violence. Although in a break with its past, this summer, for the first time, Amnesty International actually declared that attacks on Israelis should be considered violations of human rights.

Renowned international human rights lawyer and professor of law Irwin Cotler wrote, "A new, virulent, escalating, globalizing anti-Jewishness has emerged in the world which singles out Israel and the Jewish people not only for deferential and discriminatory

treatment in the family of nations, but also for specific, targeted terrorist assault. It takes the form of genocidal anti-Semitism – the public call for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people.”

Hardly any nation in the world is impervious to the plague of promoting and tolerating anti-Semitic speech and actions. In fact, when I was speaking with my children about the topics of this year’s sermons, and how hard it is to come up with themes for five sermons, my daughter, Margalit proposed a novel solution. She suggested I could devote a sermon one day to the problem of anti-Semitism in France, the next day could be about anti-Semitism in Bulgaria, one could deal with the situation in the Netherlands, and so on.

The day after the deadly Palestinian attack on Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the British newspaper, The Guardian, published an editorial criticizing Israel for, “random, vengeful acts of terror” against Palestinian civilians in Jenin. This, despite the fact that the United Nations had already issued a report dismissing the claim. Even though Israel waited until 126 civilians were murdered in the month of March before responding, so as not to be accused of overreacting, Portuguese Nobel laureate Jose Saramago wrote, “We can compare what is happening in the Palestinian territories with Auschwitz.”

It is hard to tell which came first, but there is a definite correlation between governmental policies and the attitudes expressed by leading intellectuals and the physical and verbal violence against Jews and institutions of the Jewish community. How a nation treats its Jews has always been a barometer of a country’s moral fiber.

In Kiev, 50 youths chanting “kill the Jews” went on a rampage, smashing windows in a synagogue on a Saturday evening. Jewish cemeteries and the Holocaust memorial in Salonika, Greece were defaced with pro-Palestinian slogans. Anti Israel protesters hurled rocks and bottles at Jewish places of business in Amsterdam. In Brussels, Belgium, five fire bombs were tossed into a synagogue and a Jewish bookstore was damaged by arsonists. A number of assaults on Jews and desecration of Jewish communal institutions were reported in Germany, England, and elsewhere. In Barcelona, 10,000 people demonstrated against what they called Israeli “genocide” and burned the Star of David. Norway has an informal embargo on Israeli products, as dock workers have refused to unload merchandise from Israel. The European Union has just instituted a 15% import tax on all products made in the disputed areas of Israel, and some stores are requiring that Ahava products bear a sticker with the words, “Made in the West Bank.” Israel is isolated culturally, as concerts of Israeli performers and orchestras are canceled, and performing artists avoid coming to Israel.

And in the granddaddy of European anti-Semitism, France, gangs of hooded men attacked Jews and struck them with iron clubs. Youths with baseball bats attacked the Maccabi soccer team. Buses carrying Jewish schoolchildren were attacked. A French movie theater refused to rent its theater to a group of Jewish schoolchildren who wanted to see the movie Harry Potter. Synagogues, Jewish schools, cemeteries and kosher stores were defaced. In the month of April alone, over 360 crimes were committed against Jews. A synagogue in Marseilles was burned, along with its prayer books and torah

scrolls. Despite all this, French President Jacques Chirac, had the chutzpah to protest to Prime Minister Sharon against the campaign to portray France as anti-semitic.

Gabriel Schoenfeld wrote in *Commentary* magazine, “The themes are the same everywhere. Israel, a country victimized by terrorism, stands accused of perpetrating terrorism; the Jews, having suffered the most determined and thoroughgoing genocide in history, stand accused of perpetrating genocide.” It is no coincidence that the vile terms of the very people who sought to annihilate the Jews are now applied to Israel, as people march through the streets of Europe with placards calling Jews Nazis.

Following up on a petition signed by 120 university academics for a moratorium on cultural and research links with Israel and Israeli scholars, Egyptian-born professor Mona Baker wrote to two Israelis on the editorial board of the journal she edits demanding their resignations simply because they are Israeli.

How does this differ from the Nazis firing people from academic posts just because they were Jewish?

They want to boycott? Fine, let them boycott.

The Jewish sage Ann Landers, who passed away earlier this year wrote a column a number of years ago based on something originally written by the late humorist Sam Levinson in response to the anti semites of the world.

“It’s a free world. You don’t have to like Jews if you don’t want to, but if you are going to be an anti-Semite, you should be consistent and turn your back on (everything Jews have done, including) the medical advances that Jews have made possible.

They then go on to list things such as:

“...the vaccine for hepatitis discovered by Baruch Blumber, the Wasserman test for syphilis and the first effective drug to fight syphilis developed by Paul Ehrlich. Bela Schick developed the test for diphtheria. Insulin would not have been discovered if Oskar Minkowski had not demonstrated the link between diabetes and the pancreas.

It was Burrill Crohn who identified the disease that bears his name. Alfred Hess discovered that vitamin C could cure scurvy. Dr. Casimir Funk was the first to use vitamin B to treat beriberi. Streptomycin was discovered by Dr. Woronan. Jonas Salk developed the first polo vaccine. Later, Albert Sabin developed the oral version.

Levenson concluded in his own unimitable way,

“Humanitarianism requires that we offer these gifts to all people of the world... So the bigots who don’t want to accept these gifts can go ahead and turn them down, but I’m warning you, you aren’t going to feel so good!”

In April the United Nations Human Rights Commission, with the support of France, Belgium, Sweden, Portugal, Spain and Austria passed a resolution condemning Israel for war crimes, acts of mass killing and offenses against humanity, while supporting the right of the Palestinians to resist.

With all the *tzoris* going on all around the world, and this is what they *dray* their *cup* about?!

In two days in May government forces in Nepal tracked down and killed 350 guerrillas. Rwandans have slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Tutsis, China oppresses Tibet, Syria currently occupies Lebanon, Russia bombs Chechnya, and not a word of protest is uttered in the hallowed halls of the United Nations. There is no academic or religious freedom, nor is there freedom of the press in any of the repressive and backward Arab regimes which trample on human rights. Yet only Israel is singled out, and accused of massacres and compared to Nazis, and they say it is not anti semitism!

How dare they do this. How dare the world not distinguish between aggressor and self defense. How dare the world side with the perpetrator and not the victim. It is inexplicable to me how people of good conscience can side with those who celebrate the loss of innocent lives and dip their hands in the blood of their victims.

Mitch Albom, author of “Tuesdays with Morrie” tried to explain the absurdity of the accusations in a column he wrote a few months ago:

“When we bombed Afghanistan, it was a mission to “smoke them out.” Yet when Israel attacks its hornet’s nest of terror, it is accused of “occupying” and told to retreat.

When we fired on Kabul, from the safety of the air, we said innocent people would be caught in the crossfire and, sadly this was war. Yet when Israeli soldiers go door to door in Palestinian areas, the most dangerous, yet humane way to root out terrorists, we call them “murderers” the moment one civilian is killed. When we were scorned by critics who thought our treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo was inhumane – because we bound, gagged and blindfolded them – we bristled and said, “These are dangerous people.” Yet when Israel demands certain Palestinians strip and stay on the ground, we say this is outrageous and must be stopped.

When a videotape emerges showing bin Laden speaking of September 11, we say it proves the man is evil. Yet when Israelis produce documents to show Arafat funds terror, they are accused of forgery.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Europe, of all places, has no right, less than 60 years after the Holocaust to act this way. I feel like the kid on the playground who cries out against an adversary who was supposed to refrain from attacking, "you promised you wouldn't do this again." Europeans, of all people should object and realize that there is something seriously wrong when people march in the streets shouting, "Hitler should have finished the job." The viciousness of the vitriol belies a deep-seated and underlying, visceral resentment and contempt of Jews.

Reasons for the surge of anti Jewish activity can be attributed to financial considerations of oil-dependent economies and ties to Arab business interests, as well as to the immigration of Moslem immigrants to Europe. But it is more than that. It also has to do with long-held feelings, and even a desire to be relieved of guilt over complicity in the Holocaust. In their perverted thinking, if Israel is guilty of atrocities, it somehow relieves them of responsibility for the extermination of European Jewry. The current phenomena is also far more political than previous generations, which was based on and fed by theological differences. But I am not really interested in trying to explain the justifications for such irrational prejudice.

The false charges, inversions of images, and ignoring the intimidation of Jews led Italian journalist Orianna Fallaci to speak up and challenge her fellow countrymen in a scathing article, in the spirit of Emile Zola's "J'accuse" written a century earlier. She indicts the people and governments of Europe for their shameful acts which dishonor all and wrote, "...in the past I have defended the Palestinians a great deal. Maybe more than they deserved. But I stand with Israel, I stand with the Jews,...and defend their right to not let themselves be exterminated a second time."

I have only touched upon the abominable practices and trends in European countries. Needless to say, the hatred is government sponsored, and is even more vicious, more venomous, more intense, more offensive and pervasive in the Moslem and Arab nations.

What about here in the United States? American college campuses are also swarming with anti-Semitic literature and propaganda as pro-Arab students and sympathetic professors carry out their campaign to delegitimize and isolate Israel.

The father of soon to be former Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney when asked to explain the reason his daughter lost her bid for reelection answered with one word, which he then proceeded to spell out, J-E-W-S.

But thank God we live in a country which rejects this kind of prejudice, and where such blatant Jew-bashing is rare, and where he is the exception.

The United States was the only nation to act admirably at that outrageous Conference in Durban. This past spring, when I attended the annual AIPAC conference, members of the House and Senate, from both parties, were resolute in their support of Israel. When anti-semitic graffiti was spray painted on our synagogue's sign, the police arrived immediately, and we received calls from the county prosecutor, as well as our member of

Congress and others. The words of George Washington to the small Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island, "to bigotry no sanction," still ring true.

In my 23 years as a rabbi, I have never before spoken so extensively about anti-semitism. In fact, 3 years ago, after the attack on the Los Angeles JCC, I stood before you and said that anti-semitism is not the major threat to the Jewish people. So, why is this night different from all other nights?

One reason I address the matter this Erev Yom Kippur is because it is important that Jews and others not begin to passively come to accept these horribly negative images. I urge you to speak with your children about this, because I want to be sure that none of us, and none of our children ever think even for a moment that there is a kernel of truth to any of the repulsive charges made by enemies of the Jewish people. They need to be reassured of the morality and decency of the Jewish people, and of the Israeli army, government and people. I speak about anti semitism tonight because in a world gone mad, we must not be afraid to speak up and assert the truth.

After world wide condemnation of Israel for the alleged massacre in Jenin, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asked, rather obnoxiously this past April, "Is it possible that the entire world is wrong, and Israel is right?" Well guess what? Believe it or not, the answer to his question is, "Yes!" The world is wrong, and we are right. Israel was right when it said that no massacre had taken place.

It is not the first time, nor will it be the last.

In 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin dispatched Israeli forces to destroy Iraq's nuclear reactor, a move, roundly condemned by the international community, but which all would now agree was the right thing to do, sparing the world untold horrors.

Last month the Catholic church issued a document, "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" which recognizes the validity of the Jewish covenant with God. It was an outgrowth of the Second Vatican Council of 40 years ago, which finally overturned the teachings of the past 2,000 years that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

In fact, the essence of Jewish history, ever since the time when Abraham, the first Jew, was the first to reject idolatry and child sacrifice is precisely that we have been willing to courageously go against the grain and to stand alone if necessary, against the majority and the surrounding culture.

It is this spirit which may help to explain how we have been able to contribute so much to the world.

Many people do not realize, for example that air conditioning in automobiles was invented by three Jewish brothers named Goldberg. In the 1920's the Goldberg's approached Henry Ford and offered to sell him their revolutionary new invention for use in his cars. Although enamored with the possibilities, and immediately grasping its

potential, Ford balked at the deal. The brothers stipulated that in addition to paying them a million dollars, they wanted every unit to say on it, “Goldberg Brothers Air Conditioner.” Ford, a notorious anti semite refused. He counter offered to pay them \$ 5 million. The negotiations went back and forth, and finally they settled on a price. But still, the brothers wanted their name on it. Since he wouldn’t agree to put the name Goldberg in his cars, they compromised by agreeing that their first names could go on the units, which is why to this day, every car with an air conditioner bears the names, “Norm, Hi, and Max.”

OK, so the story might not be true. But there certainly have been many other important contributions Jews have made to society. Look at how Jews have always enriched, contributed to and improved their community, wherever they live – building hospitals and museums, endowing universities and their programs, making significant contributions to the cultural life and well-being for the benefit of all.

Numbering only 14 million people, and constituting less than ½ % of the world’s population, astoundingly, there have been over 130 Jewish Nobel Prize winners. Compare this with any other ethnic or religious group. I can’t help but let you know that this contrasts with a grand total of 8 Moslems, out of a population 100 times greater, as they number 1.2 billion and are 20% of the world’s population. Jews have always instinctively sought to ameliorate conditions of all and to work for *tikun olam*, improving our world.

Does anyone really think the world would be better off without Jews? Apparently not. A recent front page article in the Wall Street Journal told of the efforts of Vanderbilt University to recruit more Jews. Alexandre Adler, French philosophy professor and editor at Le Monde warns if his country continues to pursue a policy alienating Jews, “If France does not reconcile with the Jewish community, it will lose the most vibrant part of its population.”

Perhaps the most well-known hate crime this past year was the tragic senseless murder of Daniel Perl. With an Israeli grandmother, and a street in Tel Aviv, named after a grandfather, it was clear that he was killed by his captors for being a Jew. His last words were that his mother and father were Jews, and that he was a Jew. Yes, he died as a Jew. But it is questionable if he lived as a Jew, making his death a double tragedy.

Apparently, he rarely spoke about being Jewish or Israeli, and took little interest in his heritage. He was much more of a universalist. Daniel Gill, a childhood friend said, “He was definitely not religious, his family was never highly observant.” A friend of his described him saying, “Danny was a secular Jew whose best friend was a Muslim. He was enormously open to other cultures. He was fascinated by the African world. He took salsa lessons and Spanish classes.”

Brett Stephens, until recently an editor and writer for the WSJ, and now the editor in chief of the Jerusalem Post wrote, “Pearl’s family does not belong to a synagogue. Mariane Pearl, a gentile of Cuban-Dutch parentage is a convert to Buddhism.” He

concludes, “the less one asserts oneself as a Jew, the more susceptible one is to being tagged by others as one. Daniel Pearl did not live his life as a Jew, nor did he wish to die as a Jew. In the end, it made no difference. His murderers made him a Jew all the same.”

How unfortunate for him that the rich treasury of his ancestors did not speak to him, and did not have any claim on his identity until his death.

And that is why I speak this erev Yom Kippur about anti semitism. I speak about anti semitism because I want Jews not just to die as Jews, but more importantly, to live as Jews. I speak about anti-semitism because I do not want to give our enemies the satisfaction of succeeding in ridding the world of Judaism. It is not just the Nobel Prize winners who should be a source of pride to us, but rather what Jews as Jews have contributed to bettering society, and how Jewish writings, texts, and philosophy, what we would call Jewish civilization has enriched the world.

I agree with David ben Gurion, who once said, “I am more concerned with what Jews do, than what non Jews say.” And this is what we must reflect upon.

So, when I hear parents say they are going to let their kids decide whether or not they will continue to attend religious school, the anti-semites win. When people are apathetic, and do not practice their Judaism, the anti-semites win. When people do not learn anything about their religion, do not attend services, or observe any Jewish rituals in their homes, the anti-semites win. When we are divided, or tepid in our support for Israel, the anti-semites win.

The question I would like each of us to consider this Yom Kippur, therefore is, who do you want to win? If you are upset when you hear about anti-semitism, what are you going to do about it?

Hopefully your answer will not be one of fear, but to choose to walk proudly with an eternal historic people who have brought hope and enlightenment to the world. Hopefully you will choose this Yom Kippur through your deeds and actions to cling that much more tenaciously to our proud heritage, to explore it, to deepen your understanding of it, and to thus do what you can to perpetuate Judaism into the next generation.

The best response to anti-Semitism is ---- to live as a Jew! May it be your response.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzdek
Potomac, Maryland
Kol Nidre 2002
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*