

## The Antidote to Anti-Semitism

The Talmud proclaims that Rosh Hashana celebrates Yom Harat haOlam – the day the world was created. It also declares that today is Yom HaDin – the Day of Judgment. These two concepts are not contradictory, but are combined, for today is the day when all that God created, all of God's creatures, the entire world, not just Jews, are judged.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer explicitly conveys this when it asserts, "*Vechol baei olam ya'avroon lefanecha* – All that lives on earth shall pass before You like a flock of sheep... for on this day You judge each and every living being..." Not just us, but everyone.

So you might ask: If this is a day when all the world is judged, how come we are the only ones here today? Why aren't gentiles praying in their houses of worship today?

A fair question. Maybe they didn't get the memo.

Or perhaps it reflects something deeper and more profound.

We take this day as an opportunity to pray not just for ourselves, as individuals, and for the Jewish people, but on behalf of all the nations and all people of the world – not so that they will "see the light" and suddenly convert and become Jewish. But rather, because it reflects our universalistic values and concern for all of humanity. As Elie Wiesel wrote, "our mission has never been to make the world more Jewish, only more human."

Our responsibility to be a blessing to all the world was evident centuries ago when on Sukkot seventy sacrifices were offered at the Beit Mikdash in Jerusalem on behalf of the seventy nations of the world.

So how has this worked out? Where has our concern and advocacy for others gotten us?

On the minds of Jews around the world, and most likely the subject of many High Holiday sermons this year is a topic which, as recently as a few years ago was not given much consideration – concern for our personal security because of the increased level of threats and hostility coming from all quarters.

It used to be you had to bring your tickets when you came to shul on the High Holidays to show that you were a member in good standing. I am sure many of you have seen the "Curb your Enthusiasm" show where Larry David buys a ticket for High Holiday services from a scalper outside the synagogue, only to discover that someone else is sitting in his seat because the ticket he bought was counterfeit.

It calls to mind the joke about the guy who comes to High Holiday services without a ticket and says he has to go in to deliver an important message to his brother. Against his better judgment after much back and forth, the usher reluctantly agrees to let the guy go into the sanctuary. As he opens the door to let him in, the usher warns him and says, “You can go into the sanctuary to speak to your brother, only don’t let me catch you praying while you’re in there!”

Well, now we have not just volunteer ushers, but police officers. And they are not here just to check tickets or direct traffic, but to act as security guards. And by the way – I am sure you agree with me that we have the nicest security officers. The nicest, and I might add, the best fed. They are so nice, I sometimes worry that God forbid if anything would ever happen, and they were presented with a real threat, they would confront the would-be assailant, disarm him and then say to the guy – “Here, have a knish.”

Until recently, security was not as high a concern for most Jews or Jewish organizations as it is today, but now we have been forced to re-evaluate our complacency and laid-back attitude. Growing up in a post-Holocaust world where the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis were almost universally condemned and recognized as an aberration which would never be allowed to be repeated, I never imagined that anti-Semitism would resurface to the extent that it has today.

The situation of Jews in Europe is particularly precarious and foreboding where anti-Semitism is rampant and many Jews fear for their lives as they are attacked and accosted by right wing neo-Nazis and Islamist militant anti-Semites.

Closer to home, our snug conviction that America is different from every other nation where we have lived, and that “it can’t happen here” has been shattered. In 2017 almost 60% of all reported religious hate crimes in the United States were committed against Jews. The march in Charlottesville with white supremacists bearing a striking resemblance to Nazi brownshirts, carrying torches at a nighttime rally shouting “Jews will not replace us” was a frightening image and scary precursor to the violence that has percolated and pierced the surface.

In October of the past year, a white supremacist driven by pathological xenophobic hatred burst into The Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and killed eleven worshippers. It was followed by an attack six months later on a Chabad synagogue on Shabbat in Poway, California, leading ADL to conclude in its annual report issued earlier this year that anti-Semitism in the United States has reached historic levels.

Just as the blast of the shofar is intended to jar and awaken us, the gunshots call upon us to be aroused out of our complacency; to wake up and question our long-held assumptions that anti-Semitism is a minor nuisance or a relic of the past. No longer does anti-Semitism appear to be a remote, nebulous distant threat that we need not worry about. Nor can we rationalize and try to convince ourselves that since it stems from extremist right wing marginalized losers and crazies

on the fringe we need not worry about their ability to harm us. The time has come to honestly confront the reality that anti-Semitism appears in many forms and that the threat is real.

We dare not begin to regard hate crimes, discriminatory acts or intimidation as “isolated incidents” or tolerable expressions of “free speech”, for eventually we and society will become numb, with the cumulative effect that such behavior be considered normal and acceptable. One reason this should be of concern to all and not just to Jews is because throughout history we have been the proverbial canary in the mine. History has shown that a society that turns against its Jews decays from within by the weight of its venom, for the disease prevents a culture from dealing with its real problems and like a cancer eventually destroys the body that hosts it.

In England anti-Semitism masquerading as anti-Zionism has crept into the Labour Party, and moved into the mainstream, becoming part of their platform and positions. Some of the parliamentarians who have left the party over this issue blame themselves for not taking the warning signs more seriously earlier. They say that since it was originally confined to college campuses and only took the form of criticism of Israel they mistakenly assumed it would not find a way into the general body politic.

An Israel that must maintain the means to defend itself since its very existence is threatened every day and cannot be taken for granted, presents a challenge for a generation raised to be suspicious of military might. They assume the weak must be right, and that it is inconceivable that those with power can be just. In such an atmosphere it is no wonder that Israel and its supporters are demonized on college campuses.

Nice, trusting and often naïve, Jewish students are intimidated and overwhelmed and don't know what to do or how to respond when they are harassed by hostile anti-Israel haters. Eviction notices are placed on dorm rooms of Jewish students. Anti-Israel propaganda permeates. Pro-Israel speakers are not allowed to speak. Academics from Israel are barred from participating in academic conferences. Jewish supporters of Israel are ostracized and kept out of progressive organizations, forcing them to choose between their desire to advocate for social justice and loyalty to their people. Gil Troy points out that the obsessive targeting of Israel is designed to force progressive Jews to hide their Zionism and become modern-day crypto-Jews.

Not surprisingly, I reject the notion that allows people to get away with anti-Semitic tropes by saying that they don't hate Jews, only Zionists or Israel. I have two letters for this – BDS – without the middle letter.

Omar Barghouti the founder of the BDS movement has admitted that its goal is not to end Israeli control of territories claimed by the Palestinians, or to change its policies, but to ostracize Israel and its supporters, and to delegitimize the very concept of a Jewish homeland. The real threat posed by BDS is not economic, but in the marketplace of ideas, where lies, distortions and

ignoring Israel's decency and humanity coupled with a superficial understanding and misrepresentation of their true intent contaminates the minds of young people. He is on record as having said that no Palestinian should ever accept a Jewish state.

The hyper-critical focus on the only Jewish state in the world at the UN and its agencies, among European nations, on college campuses and the radical left while ignoring injustice elsewhere in the MidEast or world is a poor attempt to camouflage anti-Semitism. The unrelenting criticism demonizes Israel and attempts to negate and deny our narrative. Professor Judea Pearl, father of slain journalist Daniel Pearl has suggested using the terms "Zionophobia" and "Judeophobia" to explain this irrational obsession with and hatred of Israel and Jews.

This does not refer to legitimate criticism of the specific policies of the government, but of the intense singling out of Israel for condemnation. Let's not fool ourselves. It has nothing to do with who is the country's leader. It is the very existence of Israel which upsets them. Until those so quick to condemn Israel begin to take up the cause of the oppressed, persecuted and disenfranchised Yazidis, Kurds, Zoroastrians, Ughurs, Rohingyas, ½ million Arabs slaughtered by Assad, Christians in Moslem countries, the victims of Isis and Turkish occupied Cyprus, their efforts to isolate Israel are exposed for the hypocrisy they try to obscure.

Jews are probably the only victims of hatred who are blamed for what is done by those who hate them. It is as wrong as it is to blame homosexuals for the prejudice they encounter, or to blame women who are victims of sexual abuse or rape.

I participate in interfaith forums promoting understanding and tolerance among Jews and Muslims, and have invited Moslem speakers to our congregation to highlight and encourage their courageous work fighting against hatred of Jews. Were we to malign or prejudge an entire religion or community we would be guilty of the very same prejudice against us that we find so despicable. But we cannot overlook or excuse the damage caused by the indoctrination that emanates from mosques, media, governments and schools throughout the Moslem and Arab world. It is no wonder that the rate of anti-Semitism exceeds 90%. Addressing the anti-Semitism of Ilhan Omar and her own indoctrination as a child, Ayaan Hirsi Ali from Somalia says that it is the most zealous, potent, dangerous, widespread and underestimated form of anti-Semitism today.

We live in a confusing time. It is almost as if we can no longer agree on what qualifies as being anti-Semitic. There are those whose policies clearly support and strengthen the Jewish state, yet they say things that if not anti-Semitic certainly resonate and are heard as such. And there are those who are vehemently opposed to the Jewish state, who profess positive attitudes towards Jews.

Our politics are so fractionalized, people debate whether hatred on the right or the left is more dangerous, not from an objective perspective, but from their partisan point of view, pointing to the hatred emanating from the other side, while ignoring that which comes from their own side.

The right claims we are promoters of race contamination, and the left sees us, the ultimate victims throughout the millenia as being privileged members of the white elite power structure. The charge of “white privilege” stereotypes all Jews and minimizes Jewish suffering and persecution. It also misrepresents the majority of Israelis who are neither white nor rich, as well as the millions of Jews who are not wealthy.

The physical attacks in this country on houses of worship have come from extremists on the right, who say, as did the shooter in Pittsburgh, “All Jews must die”. The internet has become a useful handmaiden to disseminate their rantings. While the radical right wing extremists want to kill us, the danger espoused by the radical left is equally potent.

Deborah Lipstadt warns “that sometimes the most harm can be done, not by the violent, in-your-face, self-professed Jew-hater, but by ordinary people who have acquired their views almost through cultural osmosis.” As New York Times columnist Bari Weiss points out, the threat from the left is more subtle and seductive, because it uses language that appeals to seemingly progressive values. Gil Troy has written that the anti-Semitism of intellectuals and social justice “warriors” is dangerous because it appeals to concepts of social justice and other notions that resonate with us and are consistent with the liberal values and concern for the underdog that many have been told is the essence of Judaism.

A few years ago I was with Israel’s ambassador to the United States Michael Oren at a reception at the Governor’s mansion in Annapolis. A young boy came up and innocently asked Ambassador Oren, “Of all the countries in the world that hate you, who hates you the most?”

Can you imagine that question being asked of the ambassador of any other country in the world?

People often try to diagnose the source of this irrational hatred that refuses to disappear. Is it resentment of our success? Of what we have achieved? Is it jealousy? Is it economic? Does it come from religious teachings? Are we a convenient scapegoat because we are different? It is all this and more.

Bari Weiss suggests in her new book, that it is based on a conspiratorial theory that sees Jews as the source of all evils in a society. The brilliant writer Yossi Klein HaLevi sums it up by saying that anti-Semitism is a reflection of what is most abhorrent in a society. This explains why to capitalists, Jews epitomize communism, and to communists, Jews are the personification of capitalists. To liberals, we are exploitative colonialists, and so on.

We may never be able to identify the underlying causes, nor can we comprehend why what is often called the world's oldest hatred persists and tenaciously refuses to disappear. How to explain that countries which are Judenrein, free of Jews have antisemitism? Getting to the source and core may be a futile exercise, and we may need to reconcile ourselves to the fact that it may never disappear. Little will come from putting our energy into applying logic to try to understand something as illogical as the world's oldest hatred.

So are we to just raise our hands and say – it is what it is?

Instead of trying to rationally understand the irrational I have several suggestions.

First and foremost, we must remain vigilant and not be silent in the face of such hatred.

Those on the right must call out and object to the Judeophobia and anti-Semitism on the right, and those on the left must call out and protest the Zionophobia and anti-Semitism of those on the left.

The resignation of three anti-Semitic leaders of the Women's March is an excellent model of how to respond. Women and Jews in the liberal movement were not silent. They courageously stood up and publicly exposed the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish comments, associations and beliefs of the three. We can all learn from their powerful example.

We also need to call out anti-Jewish remarks, and even anti-Jewish jokes. There was a time in the 80's and 90's when jokes about Jewish American Princesses were making the rounds. I always found their negative portrayal and unflattering stereotype of Jewish women to be abhorrent and repulsive, and was pleased when the genre was discarded.

I will never forget the first time I heard the word Jew used as a verb. I do not even want to repeat the reference. Just a week or two ago, a member of a County Council in New Jersey saw no harm in using the term. I was a college freshman at the time, working as an intern on Capitol Hill for a Congressman when the office manager made the reference. Although I was only 18 years old, and she was my boss, I explained to her why the usage was so offensive and asked her never to say it again.

It has become tolerable and even fashionable to make pejorative remarks about Jews. We should not allow individuals to use their Jewish background to cloak anti-Semitic tropes. About a month ago a local radio station jock went on a rant making crude disgusting obnoxious sophomoric remarks about the practices of observant Jews. Had these things been said about any other racial or ethnic group, he would have been shut down and taken off the air immediately. As you may have guessed, the guy was Jewish.

Similarly, we should not allow groups that purport to represent Jews but which oppose Jewish interests to present themselves as speaking on behalf of the Jewish community. Groups such as If Not Now and Jewish Voice for Peace have taken the term self hating Jew to a whole new level.

In the not too distant past candidates of major political parties vied and competed for the mantle of being the most pro-Israel candidate. Now, some candidates feel free to state publicly their misgivings about support for the Jewish state. One of our own, has even hired an anti-Semite, Linda Sarsour and given her a high profile position as a spokesperson and representative of his campaign.

Earlier this year the *New York Times* was embarrassed by the public uproar over an anti-Semitic cartoon that appeared in their international edition. I have read things in their paper that were, in my opinion a lot worse and more offensive. To show their remorse and placate the protests, they retracted it, apologized, held meetings with Jewish communal leaders, changed their policy, and even stopped publishing cartoons. The Times did everything short of changing the language of the paper of record to Yiddish to show their remorse.

Why were they so repentant and responsive this time? And why was the Jewish community so successful? For one simple reason: because we were united. No Jewish organizations issued statements saying that they weren't so offended, or that it really wasn't so bad. The lesson to be learned is that when we are united, when we stand up for our people and what we know to be right, we can accomplish great things.

We need not fight these battles alone. After the attack on the synagogue in Pittsburgh, just prior to the overflowing community-wide service we held here at B'nai Tzedek I stopped at Giant to purchase some yahrzeit candles. I was wearing my keepah, and the person in front of me, behind me and the cashier all made a point of expressing their condolences and horror over the attack.

It affirmed what I have known all along: that this is a good country, the overwhelming number of its citizens are decent people, and that we are not alone. We should seek alliances with other minorities who are singled out for discrimination. We cannot allow the intersectionality movement to deny us our right to align with others who are wronged. We should not let them dictate to us when we can and cannot act on our conviction and commitments to work on behalf of principles of social justice. And we must be as outraged as prejudice and attacks on members of the LBGQT community, immigrants and Moslems and others as we are when our own community is attacked.

And finally, let us learn from our own history.

A seminal event occurred in 1654. A boat of 24 Jews landed in the New York harbor, the first Jews to arrive in the new land. Peter Stuyvesant, the governor employed by the Dutch West

Indies Company to oversee the city known at the time as New Amsterdam sent word back to the Netherlands asking what to do with the Jews, and reassuring his company that he had locked them up.

Word came back to release them immediately and to let them settle in the new colony. Stuyvesant must not have realized that over half the directors who sat on the board of the company were Jews. The Jews sitting in Amsterdam and those who got off the boat from Recife, Brazil did not know each other. The only thing they had in common was that they knew they were Jews.

I have often thought the episode can teach us a great deal. It reflects a beautiful aspect of being Jewish – we have a connection to each other. As the Talmud tells us, *“Kol Yisrael arevin zeh b’zeh: All of Israel is responsible for each other.”*

In other words, we are in this together.

When I went to a synagogue in southern France this summer I asked the rabbi how things were going, and if they were afraid in light of all that we have heard about the attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions. (Incidentally, the synagogue was packed, with only one or two empty seats.) He told me that while there are concerns, for the most part, they were doing fine. I told him I was glad to hear that, because *“We Jews in America worry about you.”* He then said to me, *“And we Jews in France worry about you.”*

Yes, we are in this together.

Our fate is intricately intertwined.

We cannot think because it happens elsewhere it does not impact us, or because the attacks are on Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights who look different than us because they have payot and streimels, or on settlers in the West Bank we are secure. Nor can we be indifferent because the enmity is directed at Israel and the boycotts are of Israeli products.

Israel’s Consul General in New York Danny Dayan has written that *“the Jews in every generation have an extra mitzvah.”* Like Emil Fackenheim’s 614<sup>th</sup> mitzvah, he says that the commandment for our generation is to *“preserve and strengthen the State of Israel and to ensure the continued existence of the Jewish people wherever they are.”* Let us defeat anti-Semitism and defy the Jew haters by denying them a victory.

We owe the generations who came before us, who sacrificed so much to keep Judaism alive in the face of danger we can only imagine no less than clinging to our Judaism. We who live in a



free and open society which does not extract a cost for doing so, and where we are free to choose to assimilate or to be Jewish owe that to those generations who tenaciously refused to disappear.

I had a Jewish neighbor in Miami who used to tell me that even though he wasn't a good Jew, and didn't really practice Judaism, he would be the first to punch in the nose anyone who said anything negative about Jews. I appreciated his passion and intensity, (and made sure not to say anything negative about Jews around him).

But we need to be more than anti-antiSemites.

Let us be proud, defiantly proud. Proud of Jewish accomplishments. Proud of what Jews and Judaism have contributed and given to the world. Let us study our sacred inspiring texts. Let us take joy in the celebration of our culture, our heritage, our message and civilization. When we practice our religion is when we are a blessing onto the world.

To those on college campuses who seek to peel away young Jews from their connection to the Jewish people, let us respond by defiantly and proudly celebrating all that Israel has accomplished.

The answer to those who would shoot people in a synagogue, is to not be intimidated, but to come and fill our houses of worship regularly, and to make our homes and families places where the joy of being a part of this eternal people is lived. Let us joyfully observe our holidays, mitzvot, and customs and practice our religion without fear.

To those who ask what is the best response to anti-Semitism, it is – Judaism! Be Jewish!

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Rosh Hashana 5780 - September 30, 2019  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Potomac, MD  
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*