

**Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei 5777** (October 11, 2016)  
**Words Make Worlds & Anti-Semitism**

I want to speak tonight about the power of words and to discuss with you a disturbing rise in anti-Semitism we are experiencing now. I will use three local incidents that have occurred in the last six months in Beverly, Swampscott and Marblehead and link these to broader trends.

The power of language is central in our tradition. The world is created and ordered with divine speech. At the beginning of every morning prayer service we say: *Baruch sh'amar v'hayah olam* - "Blessed is the one who spoke and the world came into being!"

The human being too is the "speaking creature." In the ancient Aramaic translation of the creation of the first human being, the Hebrew *Nefesh hayah* "living soul" (Gen. 2:7) is translated as *ruach m'mal-la* "a spirit that speaks." We humans *also* speak worlds into being.

What do I mean by that? We create, in speech, the thought structures that we live within; *worlds* created with rules of what is possible, what is permissible. Who do we trust? What brings us joy? What is dangerous? The answers to these questions, and also our memories, are created from the stories we tell ourselves and others.

Of course, if someone steps on your foot or you lose your keys or are hungry, these are not just ideas. But what our physical and emotional sensations *mean* to us, and how we respond, that is reality we create and control. This is the reality landscape in which we live, a landscape not of rocks and trees and soil but of ideas and stories.

In this election season we have seen the use of political language transformed. What was considered acceptable speech has been discarded for more crass and pungent rhetoric. Part of what has opened up the possibility for the crude and harsh talk of this political season is a general disgust with "political correctness." Political correctness feels to many like an elitist effort to prevent people from saying what they think and feel because the over-sensitive might be offended. While I can understand that perspective and at times share the frustration, I am fully supportive of attempts to be careful about how others hear what we're saying. Being sensitive to people's experience is necessary to be able to communicate with them beyond a surface level. Care with to how our words are heard and understood is simple courtesy and good communication.

If we are going to know each other, we need to understand each other. To understand someone we need to understand their pain and sensitivities and that almost always requires us to share our pain and sensitivities. We don't get to hear and share that kind of personal information if we are not careful and respectful in our speech. Discovering sensitivities by poking them with a stick (as has become very popular) will get a strong reaction and also destroy the possibility of relationships. So I am a big fan of political

correctness that seeks greater understanding and deeper relationships. I will return in a moment to a troubling aspect of how the idea of political correctness is sometimes misused.

From an historical perspective, things have and continue to be unprecedentedly good for Jews in this country. First, Jewish bodies safe. This does not mean that there is zero violence against Jews, it means that we rely on the institutions of the state: police and court systems to not systematically discriminate and persecute us. Were I to feel threatened by anti-Semitic violence, I would seek out the police and expect them to help me. That is a very basic important safety that Jews have often lacked over the last 2,000 years. And beyond being protected citizens, we are well educated and strong politically and economically. *And*, with all that good news, we need to pay close attention to the shift going on regarding what people say, openly and through innuendo, about our community.

Prejudice is as common as dirt. Human beings categorize one another and have ideas about whole groups of people because of the way they look or their religion, national origin etc. This is a familiar story.

Hatred and distrust of Jews has its own special twist in that it is linked to a conspiracy theory. It's not *just* that Jews, like any other group that is distrusted and despised, have negative characteristics; Jews, the theory goes, are also incredibly powerful and manipulative and are controlling world events.

As a crude example of this, you find the following bit of classic European anti-Semitism in the Hamas charter:

They [Jews] were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there.

This is the power of words. It has been spoken and written and a lot of people believe it. The lack of any coherent evidence of this conspiracy is just further proof of the power of Jewish control of the media. That is the very nasty thing about a conspiracy theory like this, and why they are so durable: lack of evidence doesn't *undermine* the theory, it *proves* the theory!

A depressingly large number of people believe this and from their perspective, the reason you can't state it openly is not because it's insane, but because it is not "politically correct." So you can see why I feel a bit protective about political correctness. Words create worlds and throwing off the yoke of respectful polite speech has been used recently to justify anti-Semitic and racist sentiments. When someone is criticized these days for offensive speech, the ready answer is that the criticism is "political correctness run amok!"

Here is the first of the local anti-Semitic incidents I referred to above: In May someone spray painted "Merry Christmas" and dollar signs on Temple B'nei Abraham in Beverly.

The dollar signs: that's a basic anti-Semitic idea that Jews are greedy and control the money. So I suppose a person who is wondering why they don't have money can tell themselves that the Jews stole it. And then they wrote: "Merry Christmas." Why write that on a synagogue? We have no idea what they were thinking, but it got me thinking.

You may be aware that there is a "War on Christmas" (not an actual war, rather one created in words). This war, discussed with some passion by certain TV celebrities, is another example for them of "political correctness run amok." It is true that there is a change. The world is changing. We hear more "happy holidays" than we used to, and cities will put up "holiday lights" rather than "Christmas lights" on main street. My understanding of this is that businesses are trying to appeal to customers who don't celebrate Christmas, and municipalities want to spend public money on what were once called "Christmas decorations" while accommodating the first amendment to the constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." So my perspective is that our culture is changing based on changing demographics and evolving legal precedents. But that explanation wouldn't inspire someone to write "Merry Christmas" on a synagogue.

Another explanation is that there are some people, who, Grinch-like, want to steal Christmas from America. This is a "war" because the effort to steal Christmas is violent and life-threatening. So look around and ask yourself: who are these anti-Xmas warriors? Who wants to steal Xmas from our children? That's the Jews. That's how I think we got "Merry Xmas" scrawled onto our sister synagogue in Beverly.

Back to political correctness and its misuse. In some settings, rather than provide guidance for honest respectful discussion, political correctness becomes a tool to marginalize those who do not share "appropriate" views. The place where this can be anti-Semitic is that harsh anti-Israel positions are accepted as appropriate views and more nuanced or pro-Israel positions are unacceptable. This phenomenon has become very common on college campuses where people involved in Jewish groups or supportive of Israel are shut out of other governance or activist work because they can no longer be trusted. This discrimination against Jews, and particularly those with any positive view of Israel and her right to exist, manifests a latent anti-Semitism. This does not mean that all who are anti-Zionist are anti-Semites, but there is a fuzzy line and often the attention and outrage over Israeli policy is a forum for expressing prejudice against Jews, masked by a concern for justice.

A few weeks after the vandalism of Temple B'nei Abraham, someone pasted small Palestinian flags on the sign of Temple Shirat haYam in Swampscott. With all of these incidents, we can only wonder what is in the heart and mind of the perpetrators. The flag stickers were heart shaped, which feels less aggressive. The sense of violation is in the willingness to tag the Jewish community, regardless of the individual sensibilities and opinions within that community, as having a particular uniform perspective and to identify them with particular actions of the government of Israel.

Nationally, a similar and challenging recent example is the Black Lives Matter platform and their very critical stance on Israel. Black Lives Matter is a decentralized coalition but they came together to create a far-reaching platform, one element of which got massive attention in the Jewish world. In the platform, Israel, the only foreign country specifically singled out for criticism, is accused of genocide against Palestinians. This set off a very interesting vigorous debate in the Jewish world with disagreement between some younger activists and Jews of color who refused to condemn Black Lives Matter, and more established groups like the Jewish Community Relations Council in Boston, which issued a clear reproach.

I found this particularly difficult because Black Lives Matter is *the* coalition that has emerged to respond to what is a vital moral challenge - the systemic racism and the incredibly destructive levels of violence in our society. What I described earlier as feeling protected by the police and courts is simply not true for millions of our fellow citizens. At this time of year when we explicitly ask the question “who will live and who will die” there are police and people of color who are wondering if they are going to be the next casualty in this insane pattern of killing.

I was very upset by the Black Lives Matter Platform because I feel it is another indication a latent anti-Semitism in the progressive movement. But the more I thought about it, I realized that my disaffection with Black Lives Matter was blocking me from what I feel is a basic responsibility of citizenship: to actively respond to the outrageous and unacceptable levels of violence and discrimination in our society.

I returned to the Jewish Community Relations Council statement on this and found some guidance. The fourth paragraph of the statement reads:

As we dissociate ourselves from the Black Lives Matter platform and those Black Lives Matter organizations that embrace it, we recommit ourselves unequivocally to the pursuit of justice for all Americans, and to working together with our friends and neighbors in the African-American community, whose experience of the criminal justice system is, far too often, determined by race. We will not allow this profoundly disturbing development to deter us from values and principles we hold dear regarding the character of our nation and the pursuit of equality for all Americans. We remind our community that the posture on Israel expressed in this platform does not reflect or represent the views of many in the African-American community including our own cherished partners here in Boston, a community that has staunchly supported Israel’s existence and rights as a nation.

I raised this challenge at the last Cape Ann Clergy Meeting and was heartened by the interest and willingness of other clergy to work and learn together about how we might engage in a positive way consistent with our values. We are going to read a book together called The Third Reconstruction by Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II in hope of finding some models that might be positive and acceptable. (I will let you know, *bli neder*, what we discover.)

The fact that Jews are recently white (meaning only recently feel protected by police and courts) and that the social justice message of the Torah rests on a consciousness of having been a slave, means that not only do we have an obligation as citizens to be involved, but that we might, perhaps, after a lot of careful listening, have something useful to offer as Jews.

The Beverly and Swampscott examples are disturbing and extremely challenging, but I feel that I know how to work on those challenges. But then, there is the anti-Semitism that is utterly disconnected, like the quote from the Hamas charter: if there's a revolution, it must be the work of the Jews. This is what we saw at Marblehead High School the week before school started. In a dirt of a baseball diamond, in huge letters, some person or persons carved "Jews did 9/11" and then threw a rock through the Principal's window.

"Jews did 9/11" - This is a widely held conspiracy theory which a large number of people believe is simple fact. You can imagine, if someone believed such a thing, how angry and hostile they would be towards Jews. We have seen that anger and hostility expressed dramatically in electronic media. I am grateful that this vitriol is overwhelmingly in language. But of course my point is that words make worlds and I fear the leap from violence in electronic expressions to violence in flesh-and-blood. There have been several news articles written about the virulent anti-Semitic written responses to reporters who criticized the Trump campaign or the candidate.

There is a phenomenon on twitter where Jews are targeted by placing three sets of parenthesis around their names. This identifies them as Jews and they are then barraged with anti-Semitic messages. According to the Anti-Defamation League: "This symbol is the online equivalent of tagging a building with anti-Semitic graffiti or taunting someone verbally."

The positive response to this has been that writers, both Jews and non-Jews, have themselves begun to put the triple parenthesis around their own names as a sign of solidarity with those who have been the targets of anti-Semitic attacks. This is Jews and non-Jews who have *not been* targeted, signing up to potentially get vicious violent messages sent to them - perhaps evolving into physical violence at some point, in order to stand in solidarity with those who are being threatened.

While these are real threats and hatreds, from the mundane to the fantastical, we have a strong national Jewish community and strong relationships with allies. In all of the local incidents I mentioned, there was great support for the Jewish community from other clergy and communities of faith. We will continue to be strong if we pay attention and don't become petty and foolish. How might one succeed in defeating a strong Jewish community such as ours? Isolate and divide. Isolate the community from natural allies, and exploit divisions within the community. We need to be attentive the dangers we are facing and fierce in our efforts to prevent both fracturing in our community, and weakening of our bonds with allies. That means being patient and listening and not rushing to criticize.

As I announced at the annual meeting in June, as a result of the incident in Beverly, I co-chaired a meeting with my friend and colleague Anne Deneen that included other clergy and representatives of the police, schools and municipalities of Gloucester and Rockport. The purpose of the meeting was to hear how our schools and cities were preparing for, and trying to preempt any sort of hate crime, and what plans were in place to respond to such a crime or other crisis.

I want to close my remarks today with the midrash I shared to begin that meeting. The midrash appears to explain the verse: “*And God was king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people and the tribes of Israel were gathered together.*” (Deut 33:5)

The midrash reads this verse to say: God was king *only* when the people were gathered together.

**Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** says: This is like a person who brought ships and anchored them together and placed them in the middle of the sea and built upon them a palace. As long as the ships are tied to each other – the palace exists. Once the ships separate from each other – the palace cannot exist. (Sifre on Deuteronomy, #346)

Staying connected in the middle of the ocean over the chaotic seas is not easy. It is hard work. But only through that work can we create a place of holiness.

Our words create worlds.

Let us stand together and speak words of unity of peace and of love.

*Hatimah Tovah! - May your name be sealed for good in the Book of Life*

*“A sealing for good”*

*Tzom Kal! - May you have a meaningful fast*

The following are related articles:

- Moment Magazine, March-April 2016 Edition: [How The Black Lives Matter and Palestinian Movements Converged](#)
- New York Times, October 19, 2016: [Anti-Semitic Posts, Many From Trump Supporters, Surge on Twitter](#)