

Responding to Elijah's Call: Leave the Ruins and Come to the Table  
Yom Kippur Morning 5780  
Barnert Temple  
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A visitor in Jerusalem notices the sun; it is time to stop for afternoon prayer. Finding the ruins of what was once an old synagogue, she enters. She prays. When she is finished, she realizes she is not alone. Elijah, the prophet, has been guarding the entrance, waiting for her. With great respect Elijah says, "my friend, you should have prayed on the street, instead of within these ruins." "On the street," she says, also with reverence, "On the street I might have been interrupted by other passers-by. I might have been distracted." "Nevertheless," Elijah respectfully responds, "we do not pray within a sanctuary in ruins. The relic of our destruction is not a place for the words meant to move us forward."<sup>i</sup>

This Talmudic story is striking, even surprising. We might think a ruined synagogue in Jerusalem is an ideal place for prayer – a once holy site in an eternally holy place. How many of us have found ourselves in ancient places while vacationing abroad, moved by our connection with the Jews who lived, and perhaps died, in these places of memory. We feel connected to their lives and their prayer, their celebration and their sadness. We are a people of memory. We learn from this memory.

But, Elijah urges, don't romanticize the destruction; don't get too comfortable in what is broken. Memory is meant to point us ahead. And so, the prophet escorts us – with our words of prayer – out of the ruins, into the world.

What are today's ruins, the issues in which we are hunkering down, under which we encamp and take shelter? One such issue is the rise of antisemitism – in word and deed. And antisemitism is not just a ruin of Jewish history. The rise of antisemitism is real, right now, and demands our attention and our action. I liken it to the Talmudic ruins because dwelling here without also moving toward constructive action ignores the call of the prophet Elijah whose presence reminds us, always, of our essential role in building a world of wholeness and not lingering inside the ruin.

My guess is that most, if not all of us here, have had first-hand experiences with antisemitism. My first one was in 5th grade when a classmate called me a slur I will not repeat out loud but rhymes with the word "pike." Eleven-year-olds only learn those words at home – I knew this then, too – but it stung and stayed with me. In my tenth year here at Barnert, I can tell you that I have been hearing from our students about implicit and explicit antisemitic incidents throughout this decade, and recently with more frequency. Offensive Holocaust jokes have been tossed their way. Also pennies, thrown at the feet of Jewish teens in all of the towns where we live. That was "normal" before the last year or so. Incidents of swastikas in bathrooms and on desks and etched into school bus seats have skyrocketed. In my town of Fair Lawn we received a note from the Superintendent last week about a swastika found in one of our Middle Schools. In the FLO district, in

Glen Rock, in Ridgewood, in Haskell, and Ringwood and beyond – every town has experienced this recently. I know this because you have called and sent articles and wondered what, exactly, was happening.

Much has been written about the rise of antisemitism on both the left and the right. While it manifests differently in different communities, it is certainly alive and making us unwell across the political spectrum. We see antisemitism, for example, in defining the parameters about whether Jews can participate in particular political movements, as we saw in the conflict in the lead up to the Women’s March last year.

We see this in what often feels like a lack of evenhandedness in the way Israel’s actions are judged. And most crucially, we see the support of hatred from neo-Nazis and white supremacists through political rhetoric and acts of violence and destruction of life and property. We see it in political comments from the President – “there are good people on both sides” – and in local politicians, too, with the recent defense of the phrase “Jew-down” as not being “antisemitic or anti-anything.”

How do we know when something is truly antisemitic? Deborah Lipstadt, in her newest book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, provides some help. She writes: “Imagine that someone has done something you find objectionable. You may legitimately resent the person because of his or her actions or attitudes. But if you resent him even an iota more because this person is Jewish, that is antisemitism.” She then offers two hypothetical examples to concretize her point. “Imagine a driver who has been deliberately forced off the road by an erratic driver who happens to be black. The person who has almost been hit can legitimately complain to the other people in the car about the dangerous driver. But if he decries “that black guy” who has done this, he has crossed the line into racist. The driver’s race is unrelated to his driving skills... Now imagine someone telling his friend about a person whom he feels has cheated him in a business transaction. Complaining about that “crooked real-estate developer” is one thing. Complaining about that “crooked Jewish real-estate developer” is antisemitism.”<sup>iii</sup>

Something is racist or homophobic or antisemitic when someone’s skin color or sexuality or Jewish identity is used as a description of something that has nothing to do with race or who we love or our religion. And Lipstadt, an expert on the Holocaust and antisemitism, further argues that those who make space for and facilitate and fan the flames of others who are antisemitic are just as dangerous. Spouting language of hate for anyone creates an environment that is dangerous for everyone.

So it makes sense that there is some underlying level of unease in our communities today; some concern about the safety of Jews in American 2019. This is what has prompted many to express the concern that what they see and hear is eerily similar to the years leading up to World War II and the Holocaust. But, Lipstadt, remember, an expert in Holocaust history, responds to this concern head on, particularly in response to the heightened concern about what is going on politically in Europe. “While I agree about the

disturbing reemergence of antisemitism...today," she writes, "I firmly eschew comparisons to Germany in the 1930's, which was state sponsored antisemitism in which national and local governmental bodies as well as academic institutions enthusiastically participated. Nothing that we are witnessing today compares in any measure to the kind of endemic hatred and persecution that German and Austrian Jews were subjected to in the years leading up to WWII."<sup>iii</sup> Is Lipstadt alarmed? Yes. This moment deserves our attention, she instructs, but not our panic.

So what, then, are we to do, if the moment doesn't call for full-fledged panic? Lipstadt offers a few clues. In the introduction to her books she writes, "Antisemitism flourishes in a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities. When expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups."<sup>iv</sup>

This moment calls for us to see rising antisemitism as intimately connected to similar hatred directed at groups of people also defined as "other". Not only because we are Jews and we are commanded to work to repair the world, but specifically in this time of hatred and violence directed at Jews, we need to show up in support of all who are being oppressed. And there are partners in this holy work who are waiting for us.

One such person is Eric Ward, a political strategist, who has spent much of his career as a black activist combating white nationalism and teaching people about antisemitism. Why, you might wonder, is Ward so focused on antisemitism, when he himself is not Jewish? Because, Ward contends, all of the destructive "-isms" arise from the original hatred, antisemitism.

Ward's career has evolved around understanding and working against American white nationalism, "which, he believes, emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacy." This white nationalism, he writes, "is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core."<sup>v</sup> Ward continues: "What is this arch-nemesis of the White race, whose machinations have prevented the natural and inevitable imposition of white supremacy? It is, of course, the Jews. Jews function for today's White nationalists as they often have for antisemites through the centuries: as the demons stirring an otherwise changing and heterogeneous pot of lesser evils."

Simply stated, White Nationalists hold Jews responsible for social changes they view as negative that have taken place since the 1960's such as civil rights, gender equity, and marriage equality.

And on top of that, Jews occupy a particular place in this "ideological matrix" in part because so many of us read as White, he says. This makes us a particular threat to white nationalists in this country. Ward writes that he discovered that "antisemitism is a

particular and potent form of racism so central to White supremacy that Black people would not win [their] freedom without tearing it down.”

Eric Ward spoke at a Reform Jewish Social Justice conference I attended with a group of Barnert leaders earlier this spring called the Consultation on Conscience. I was moved deeply by my learning with him. He came to this gathering of Jewish leaders to both witness the fear and the anger in our communities while also calling us into a conversation that has been awaiting our participation for some time now. Ward shared his story – both his own experiences of racism as a black man in this country and the exploration that led him to the belief that “antisemitism was the lynchpin of the White nationalist belief system.”

From this I learned that I must care about white nationalism not only because I care about people who are targeted and oppressed. I must engage with white nationalism because my story is inseparable from the larger crisis. My involvement is not only for my benefit but in support of the humanity of each of us.

In this time of fear and vulnerability, we must realize that our safety and freedom is dependent on the safety and freedom of anyone subjected to the hate and violence of white nationalism here in the United States.

Ward’s teaching – and pointed invitation – comes to us at a critical time, both in the national and international conversation and also today, on Yom Kippur. When we are afraid, we may be inclined to turn inward. To put up walls and shut people out in order to build up our own feelings of safety. To cloister ourselves inside of a ruin, metaphorically speaking.

A bubble that could protect us and our kids and our families sounds pretty appealing when we are scared.

But no such bubble exists. And if it did, we know it’s not the way of our tradition. What does exist is an extensive network of partners who know what it is like to face vitriol and institutionalized hatred, and who know as well the immeasurable good that comes from transforming a shared fear into activism for equality and justice and opportunity.

Many of these partners are waiting for us to join the conversation...as long as we see our story and our safety and our freedom as woven together with theirs. This moment, then, while certainly in part about the resurgence of antisemitism, is also about showing up and listening and learning with others. Then we can formulate collective responses, buttressed structures that build people up instead of tearing them down.

At Barnert we have many opportunities to do this work. We build when we welcome, feed, and support people in our communities – specifically with the New Jersey Jewish Coalition for Refugees and the food and shelter organization we support, CUMAC. Our

partnership with CUMAC in Paterson continues to deepen with regular Social Action Squad trips to sort food. We are also learning how to more effectively partner with clients who shop in their marketplace. The New Jersey Jewish Coalition for Refugees is a grassroots organization guided by HIAS with which we are actively engaged. We are learning about, and then formulating responses to, policies that are trying to limit the number of refugees who can enter the United States and minimize the support available to those who are already here. All of this work is driven by members of our sacred community and is an effective way to respond to this dark time with the light of learning and connection. Keep an eye out for future CUMAC dates and information about an advocacy training we will be hosting in the next few months.

This intentional move – to see our humanity as inseparable from the humanity of others – is critical in this moment. In the face of rising hatred, the rising visibility of white nationalism which is underwritten by antisemitism, we have to make a choice. We have to decide if we are going to get stuck in the ruins where we met the prophet Elijah or if we are going to build something new with the best of what once was.

It was not so long ago that the reason given for living as a Jew was because so many had been killed in the Holocaust. Some Pew reports say it still is. My mother has shared with me the story from the meeting she and my father had with the rabbi before they were married. At this meeting the rabbi handed her a pamphlet, called “The Duties of the Jewish Wife.” Among those duties, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, was to do her part to repopulate the Jewish community. Why live in a Jewish family? Because of the Shoah – make more Jewish babies.

Now, you know I am all in favor of Jewish babies. But you can imagine that my premarital conversations with couples are different in tone and content. Among other things, we talk about how their Jewish home might look in symbol and ritual. And how their Jewish values will be lived in action and word. This is a very different message; this one builds on memory and points us to connection and partnership and justice.

Our Jewish lives must not grow out of fear or hatred of those who wish us ill. Rabbi Soloveitcik, a seminal leader in the creation of what we now call Modern Orthodoxy, taught that there are two ways that a group of individuals can become a people.<sup>vi</sup> The first is when they face a common enemy and band together for mutual protection. This group is a defense formation – Soloveitchik notes that the Hebrew used in this context is *machaneh*, camp. The other way to build community is when they “share a vision, an aspiration, a set of ideals.” The Hebrew in this context is *eidah*, congregation. The first two letters of *eidah* spell the word *eid*, a witness. We come together in community that moves us to realize a shared vision when we are witness to one another – witness of all the good we share and all the challenges we face.

We have to make a choice. Are we going to be a *machaneh*, a people who build around fear and who pray in ruins? Or, are we going to make the choice to witness one

another, to create an *eidah*, to build out of the bricks of justice and kindness that helped support what stood before, something new and resilient and inclusive of all who seek peace?

In this time of rising antisemitism – implicit, explicit, and everything in between – we have to come to the table already filled with our partners working against the hatred of white nationalism. We have to see that our stories are woven together, that there is no “us” and “them,” and that we are not alone.

And so we return, to the visitor in Jerusalem who stopped for her afternoon prayer in the ruins of the an old synagogue. Elijah, the prophet, was there the whole time, guarding the entrance, waiting for her. With great respect Elijah said, “my friend, you should have prayed on the street, instead of within these ruins.” “On the street,” she says, also with reverence, “On the street I might have been interrupted by other passers-by. I might have been distracted.” “You miss the point,” Elijah respectfully responds, “we do not pray within a sanctuary in ruins. The relic of our destruction is not a place for the words meant to move us forward.<sup>vii</sup> Those distractions are actually invitations. What did you hear,” Elijah asked, “when you were inside the ruins?” The visitor replied, “I heard the *bat kol*, the heavenly voice, like the echo of that roar of God, the source of love and connection.” “An echo,” I imagine Elijah said, “because the voice came from those who call you to build something new with the best of what remains in this once holy place.”

If you’re afraid, if you’re angry, if you’re committed to this almost six-thousand-year-old project of building a world of justice and love, the time to gather for wholeness is now. The Heavenly voice calls. Our seats at the table are waiting. Each one of us is needed. Let’s build together.

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<sup>i</sup> BT Berachot 3a

<sup>ii</sup> Lipstadt, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, p15

<sup>iii</sup> Lipstadt, p109.

<sup>iv</sup> Lipstadt, pxi.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>

<sup>vi</sup> [https://gallery.mailchimp.com/2a91b54e856e0e4ee78b585d2/files/967cba1b-e201-4c60-90b3-2ed4906ec8b5/C\\_C\\_5779\\_Camp\\_and\\_Congregation\\_Beha\\_alotecha\\_5779\\_01.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/2a91b54e856e0e4ee78b585d2/files/967cba1b-e201-4c60-90b3-2ed4906ec8b5/C_C_5779_Camp_and_Congregation_Beha_alotecha_5779_01.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> BT Berachot 3a