

November 3, 2022

Rabbi Peltz – *Lekh Lekha*

For the past few weeks, I have received almost daily emails from members of our community about antisemitism. Some share antisemitic comments or incidents in the news, while others share antisemitic incidents that have happened to them or their children. There was the email about one of our 8th grade students who stood up to another student who was chanting “Kill the Jews, that’s what we do!” on the playground. Another email came from a parent whose college student was trying to push back against antisemitic posts on social media. The list goes on. According to the ADL, antisemitic incidents increased in the US by 60% in 2021. This year they are on track to increase even more. There are many factors that have caused this rise in antisemitism, but what is more important to me, at this moment, is to talk with you about how we confront it. Both when it is perpetrated in our own schools and community, as well as on college campuses, in sports, music and the media, and in politics. The fact that antisemitism is coming from all corners – from Kanye to Kyrie, from the far right and the far left – makes our task all the more urgent. How do we respond as individuals, and as a community, in this climate of hate?

There is no simple answer to this question, but here are some suggestions and examples. First, we need to have courage. We need courage to be able to stand up to the antisemitism that we see and experience. I have been particularly proud of our middle school, high school and college students who have stood up to antisemitism from classmates in person and online. We need to have the courage to stand up and call it out when we see it, especially when it comes from those close to us. That might be a co-worker, classmate, friend, or political ally. I am so tired of the “whataboutism” that parades as a response to antisemitism that comes from someone with whom we normally agree. We have all experienced it. Instead of confronting it with that individual or group with whom we generally identify, fingers are pointed at the other side. While all antisemitism needs to be called out, it is much more effective when it comes from someone with whom you are usually aligned. It is essential that we call antisemitism out because the more hate we see in society the more we become tolerant of it. This takes courage, and we need more of it in our world.

Second, we need knowledge. It is important to understand the history of antisemitism so that we better recognize the ways in which antisemitism is used in our world. It begins with how we define antisemitism. Professor Deborah Lipstadt, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, defines it simply as discrimination, prejudice or hatred toward Jews. Sometimes it is obvious, a swastika or a blatantly hateful comment, but other times it is more insidious. Often people try to pass off an antisemitic comment as a mere joke, even though it is deadly serious. Anti-Zionism is also another form of antisemitism that masquerades as criticism of Israel. There is a difference between criticizing a democratic country’s policies and questioning its right to exist and demonizing its citizens and those who support it. Educating ourselves about the history and contemporary uses of antisemitism helps us to respond to it today more effectively.

Third, we need support. Support can come in the form of resources as well as knowing that you have people in your corner. I can say confidently that we all have each other, our TBS Family, in our corner when it comes to confronting antisemitism. And we are grateful to have partners like the ADL and our local JCRC to help provide us with resources and strategies for talking about

and combating antisemitism. As an ADL Signature Synagogue, we have special access to their resources. They have helped us in congregational programs, as well as in working with our teens. With the help of ADL resources, Rabbi Wexler and Alex Weinberg have been talking with our teens in HaMakom and Keshet about antisemitism, and each year I work with our 11th-12th grade students to prepare them to confront antisemitism when they get to campus. We have also set up a page on our website, www.tbsonline.org/antisemitismresources, to help you and your family talk about antisemitism today and learn strategies to confront it. We are also here to meet with you and to connect you with experts who can give us the tools and support we need to confront this dangerous threat together.

We also can receive support from our tradition and history. Jews have confronted antisemitism, discrimination, persecution and worse for centuries. But here we are. We have our challenges, but we are a growing and thriving people. We can look to the first Jew, Abraham, to see how we have been able to persevere. Our Torah portion this week is *lekh lekha*, and it describes God's call to Abraham and Sarah to found the Jewish people. According to our tradition, Abraham was an outsider, he didn't conform with the norms of his time, and he was a fierce fighter for his beliefs. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch notes in his commentary that Abraham's example is meant to instill within us the strength to stand as an alternative to the dominant culture. From Abraham, he writes, we inherited the courage to be a minority, and the conviction to stand up for our beliefs and our people no matter what or who challenges us. This is how our people have prevailed from one generation to the next. Now it is our turn, and we too will go forth, building bridges and standing up to hate, no matter where it comes from.

We are living in a scary moment. Antisemitism and hatred in many forms are on the rise. Anti-democratic movements are gaining ground in many countries around the world, including our own. Most of us have the privilege of being able to go about our daily lives without having to think too much about these things, until something happens, like it has recently for more and more people in our community. I imagine that you, like me, feel a sense of worry and anxiety for the future that our children and grandchildren will inherit. We cannot simply live with this fear looming in the background, we must face it. When we help each other have courage, gain knowledge, and feel the strength of our combined support we can confidently, proudly and strongly stand up to antisemitism and hatred. We need to look at the world honestly, through the perspective of our history and our values, and identify right from wrong, hate from humor, and be able to see not only the world for what it is but what it can be. Like Abraham, we will not travel a simple and straight path towards our ultimate goal, and our greatest prayer, of living in a world of *shalom*. We will achieve this, and do so more quickly, if we are able to work towards it together. This is how we will continue our Jewish mission to fulfill the promise that God gave to Abraham, to be a part of a great nation that is blessing to the world.