

**Beth Am B'Yachad:  
The Complexities of Being Jewish in America Today**

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In 1570, Luis de Carabajal arrived in current day Texas, becoming the first Jew to live in America. Years later the Inquisition arrested him for numerous charges. The only charge that was upheld was concealing his relatives secretly practiced Judaism.

In 1584, 14 years later, Joachim Gans arrived in Virginia, the second Jew to live in America. 5 years later the Bishop of Chichester charged him with blasphemy for not proclaiming that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

Following them, the next Jews arrived 70 years later in September 1654, 23 souls from the Sephardic community in Recife, Brazil, landing in the Dutch colony New Amsterdam, now New York City. Governor Peter Stuyvesant attempted to have the Jews expelled, accusing them of “their customary usury and deceitful trading.” Only the Dutch West India Company’s intervention stopped him, while admitting, “We would have liked to ... fulfill your wishes ... that the new territories should no more be allowed to be infected by people of the Jewish nation.”

Needless to say, even from the very beginning, being Jewish in America has been filled with complexity. Jews have wanted to believe that America is different from countless other places where we found no home. In the famous correspondence with President George Washington, the synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island expressed to the first president that hopes could become reality in America: [saying] the government gives “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” and Washington echoed those words back.<sup>1</sup> The rise and fall of the status of Jews in American society is well documented: the highlights of religious freedom, Albert Einstein, economic success, Mel Brooks, political victories, and New York deli, and the low lights of red-lining, Leo Frank, synagogue bombings, Gen. Grant’s Order No. 11, Bernie Madoff, and neo-Nazis marching in US streets.

Amid the roller coaster of the past few years, let us take stock – what is the current status of Jews in America? What defines us now? With these questions, there are a myriad of subjects we could consider, yet one topic exasperatingly leads to another. The number of books, articles, and literature on this subject, often conflicting with each other, is daunting. As our New Year begins, and we consider where we are, as individuals and as a community, I seek to do one simple thing – to complicate matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Lila Corwin Berman, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/american-jews-always-believed-the-us-was-exceptional-we-were-wrong/2018/11/01/43be2f62-dd7c-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/american-jews-always-believed-the-us-was-exceptional-we-were-wrong/2018/11/01/43be2f62-dd7c-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html)

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, probably summed it up best when he wrote, “The Jewish people exists in all its bewildering complexity.”<sup>2</sup> Being Jewish is not easy. Our laws contradict. Our rituals are complicated. Our history is tumultuous. Our approach is argumentative, to say the least. Yiddish playwright Shalom Aleichem appropriately titled his 1920 comedy, “It’s Hard to be a Jew.” This moment in American Jewish history is especially complex. We are in a time when we are more tribalistic and divisive; life is getting faster, more complicated, dynamic, and strained. Our inclination may be to scream, “slow down!” or to seek simple answers to complicated matters. But I argue otherwise – let us embrace the complexity. The Talmud, the magnum opus of Jewish law, declares, “Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b’zeh – All Jews are responsible for one another,” expressing the unity between us all.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of how complex, frustrating, or mind-boggling America can be for Jews, we accept this challenge b’yachad / together, living this year’s Learning Theme. Let us consider being Jewish in America today through three lenses – external anti-Semitism, internal diversity, and the personal impact – all with the goal of embracing the complexity of the American Jewish people.

We cannot delve into any discussion about the current experience of American Jews without acknowledging the terrifying rise of anti-Semitism. In 2018, assaults against Jews doubled, increasing 60% in Washington State.<sup>4</sup> “73% of [Jewish Americans] believe [we] are less secure than they were two years ago.”<sup>5</sup> Disturbingly, listing incidents of recent anti-Semitism, including local examples, would be extensive.<sup>6</sup> Some who sit in this room today have experienced these vile acts directly. The reality of the current state of anti-Semitism needs to be more firmly and widely acknowledged.

But even this is not easy. Anti-Semitism itself is complicated, with many modern faces, including acts of physical violence, various politicians spouting tropes and dog whistles with ease, ignorance of what anti-Semitism is among the general public, and more. To pass anti-Semitism off only as Jew-hatred fails to admit the complex, historic, systemic, and deeply-entrenched poison that is anti-Semitism in America. Much has been written by a range of authors pinpointing anti-Semitism on the right or the left, in America, Europe, or the Middle East, a centuries-old model or so-called “new anti-Semitism.” Anti-Semitism is a

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century,” 2012, p. 47

<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot 39a

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.adl.org/audit2018>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jewishelectorateinstitute.org/poll-domestic-issues-dominate-the-priorities-of-the-jewish-electorate/>

<sup>6</sup> A few examples: <https://crosscut.com/2019/04/graffiti-slurs-swastikas-anti-semitic-incidents-are-rise-wa>, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/anti-semitic-graffiti-targets-jewish-familys-west-seattle-home/>, <https://crosscut.com/2019/08/flyers-seattle-synagogues-latest-series-racist-incidents>, <https://patch.com/washington/woodinville/amp/28273744/what-happened-when-a-holocaust-denier-showed-up-in-woodinville>, <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Antisemitism/String-of-attacks-on-Orthodox-Jews-in-Brooklyn-continues-600544>, <https://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2019/09/the-case-of-the-allegedly-antisemitic-judge/>,

complex subject, a weed present across the spectrum of political and social thought. If we are only willing to identify anti-Semitism in the political party opposite of our own, we have fallen silent to the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism today.

Why do we often overlook the prevalence of anti-Semitism across all political parties and throughout our society? Put succinctly by modern scholars, “Anti-Semitism does not fit neatly into American narratives.”<sup>7</sup> As we are faced with the reality of anti-Semitism, what are we do to? For one, we can work more b’yachad / together on facing this challenge, even when daunting or fear-inducing. To that end, I applaud the work of the Anti-Defamation League, the many activists and advocates fighting the more public incidents of anti-Semitism, and this past week’s press release by the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle with a community-wide definition of anti-Semitism signed by 46 local Jewish organizations, including Temple Beth Am.<sup>8</sup>

On the individual level, we must remain vigilant against public attacks and threats, as well as more underlying but similarly incipient anti-Semitic attitudes that are not limited to that day’s headlines. We must be aware of how our own words and approaches can play into the complex web of anti-Semitic attitudes, including recognizing when we are sheepish in the face of anti-Semitic slurs. We have to be willing to call it out when we hear it, especially from our friends and political allies, whether we identify on the political right or left. Anti-Semitism is forcing us further into divisions, but we must resist the simplicity of “our side good, their side bad.” We must live in the complexity in order to nurture it.

This leads us to the second feature of our current complex American Jewish experience, our internal diversity. Jews are caught in a conundrum. We are both a marginalized group who face threats like anti-Semitism, yet many of us are part of the greater white community that has access to parts of society that other marginalized groups do not. The thought-provoking Pacific Northwest civil rights activist and strategist Eric Ward writes powerfully on this subject, highlighting how anti-Semitism has been misunderstood in American history, especially in how it intertwines with anti-black racism. He writes, “The Jewish community... has only been allowed temporary access to privileges.<sup>9</sup> Privilege, after all, is not the same as power. Privilege can be revoked.”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, all too often we are patently ignoring the experiences, lives, and challenges of Jews of color, who make up at least 12% of the American Jewish community,

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<sup>7</sup> Jeannie Lewis and Timi Gerson, <https://www.ncrp.org/2018/11/anti-semitism-and-anti-black-racism-both-advance-white-supremacy.html>

<sup>8</sup> Nina Shapiro, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/jewish-leaders-condemn-rise-in-anti-semitism-across-washington-urge-lawmakers-to-fight-hatred/#comments>, <https://www.jewishinseattle.org/community-services/advocacy/antisemitism/>

<sup>9</sup> Eric Ward, <https://www.tikkun.org/the-evolution-of-identity-politics-an-interview-with-eric-ward>

<sup>10</sup> Eric Ward, <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>

not to mention the 20% of Jewish households who are multiracial.<sup>11</sup> That means that one person in every minyan would be a Jew of color. However, I rarely see that reflected in our Jewish community today. Through faulty population studies, Ashkenazi-centric ways we discuss Jewish history, missing Jews of color in leadership positions, and other impacts of our own assumptions and biases, we are telling and reinforcing an oversimplification of who we are as an American Jewish people. Sadly, this has led to real-life consequences and pain for members of our Jewish family, including, “Jews of color [feeling] othered in many Jewish institutions that proclaim to be welcoming of all..., forcing many to code-switch to belong or be heard... further othering and disempowering [them].”<sup>12</sup>

Jewish community, experience, and practice are also evolving in America today. Whether it is race, political persuasion, theological beliefs, or most especially, Israel and Palestine, we cannot and should not be painting the Jewish community with broad strokes. We already see the general American community doing this for us. All too often politicians act like securing the “Jewish vote” is simply done by talking about Israel. Our community cannot be oversimplified to a single issue. While some identify Israel as their top voting priority, the non-partisan Jewish Electorate Institute found that, while Israel is very important to the Jewish community, it is a rather low policy priority when voting, focusing instead on a plethora of other issues.<sup>13</sup> Political strategists have underestimated the complexity of who are as a people. We should not do the same.

We must use this knowledge to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate the diversity of our Jewish community, and our Jewish selves, both across the nation and at Temple Beth Am. Over the years, I have had conversations with many of you where we constrain our Jewish identity to one part of Judaism – a single group, purpose, or event. It is, for some, a simple equation, activity X equals my Jewish experience. While important, I feel like we are missing out! Remember Rabbi Sacks teaches that Jewish existence is bewilderingly complex. Embrace that complexity, especially if it means expanding our Jewish equation with a few more components and variables, making it a bit less simple.

This applies to our synagogue’s Jewish identity as well. There is no one simple way to be Jewish as a community, and our membership needs to embrace the complexity of American Jewish life today. This means we cannot just tweak what we do in worship, in education, in how we experience Jewish community. We need to engage more ideas, approaches, and voices, more complexity in how Temple Beth Am and we “do Jewish.” And mostly, we need some self-awareness and humility, appreciating that how we connect with Jewish tradition is not how others might, being open to learn from them. Awareness of our full Jewish community will lead to improved education of the general public about our

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<sup>11</sup> Ilana Kaufman and Ari Kelman, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jews-of-color-and-who-counts-in-the-jewish-community/>

<sup>12</sup> Lyn Light Geller and Laura Hemlock, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/jews-of-color-belonging-we-all-have-work-to-do/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.jewishelectorateinstitute.org/poll-domestic-issues-dominate-the-priorities-of-the-jewish-electorate/>

depth and diversity, alleviating anti-Semitism and building greater knowledge. May our complexity be a blessing that we continue to explore and revel in.

Finally, after considering difficult external pressures and our vibrant diversity, I now ask us to look inside ourselves, at the personal emotional impact of being Jewish in America today. I wonder if we as a community have failed ourselves and our youth by focusing too much on the places, institutions, and practices of Judaism in America, and not enough on the people themselves. Former Beth Am Scholar-in-Residence, Rabbi Deborah Waxman, in writing about Jewish resilience, reminds us “Judaism has sustained the Jewish people because it sustains individuals.”<sup>14</sup> We lose sight of what is most urgent when we focus on sustaining our institutions. It is much harder, yet more crucial, to focus on people, to build a stronger community to which individuals see themselves belonging.

There is a lot written about American Jewish life, with statistics, demographics, and projected models. Numbers are nice; they are direct. Rabbi Paul Kipnes writes poignantly, “We live in an age when many yearn for simplicity, [punctuated by] 30-second videos and clever memes, ... But when we practice this reductionism, we overlook [so much], ... In the early days of the Talmud,... the ancient rabbis lived among shades of gray, exhibiting incredible complexity and nuance... [Maybe] the rabbis of old had it right.”<sup>15</sup> Our Jewish experience needs to be far more complex, inhabiting the gray areas. This is certainly true for me. I do not want my Judaism whittled down to a series of easy quotes and memes. We are the people whose primary texts are a series of debates, without many resolutions. We are the people who can read every verse of Torah in 70 different ways. We are the people who can ask one question to two Jews and get three answers. I want to exist in the complexity. I want to breathe in the contradictions. I want to live with uncertainty. I want to be an American Jew and all that means, even when it is so complex.

For me, this means being inspired by our youth leaders, learning from the Jewish complexity in which they live, inhabiting the gray areas. I have been moved by articles by young authors with titles like, “Being Jewish has always been uncomfortable,”<sup>16</sup> “Sometimes It’s Hard to Be a Jew,”<sup>17</sup> “Being a Jewish Teen in Seattle is Complicated,”<sup>18</sup> and “The unbearable loneliness of being Jewish in America.”<sup>19</sup> Many of these articles are written in response to anti-Semitic incidents around the country. Even as they express their fear, they also express great hope – in community, in friendships, in Judaism itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Deborah Waxman, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/keeping-the-faith-resilience-in-the-jewish-tradition/>

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Paul Kipnes, <https://www.paulkipnes.com/embracing-nuance-and-complexity-on-the-river-of-life/>

<sup>16</sup> Arianna Davidson, <https://universe.byu.edu/2018/11/15/being-jewish-in-america-today-1/>

<sup>17</sup> Linda Haase Cohen, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sometimes-its-hard-to-be\\_b\\_6457336](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sometimes-its-hard-to-be_b_6457336)

<sup>18</sup> Ella Gonchar, <https://mag.jewishinseattle.org/articles/2019/6/13/being-a-jewish-teen-in-seattle-is-complicated>

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Myers, <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2019/05/10/the-unbearable-loneliness-of-being-jewish-in-america/>

The youth are one light on my journey, showing me that complexity is worth living. I receive that same encouragement from those who recently converted to Judaism. This past month, I was honored to sit on a number of Beit Din, as we welcomed individuals converting into the Jewish people. We sit, my two colleagues and me, with our conversion candidate, and ask them, “How does it feel to join a people who have been persecuted in every generation?” In the past, this question was asked in a rather theoretical way, but sadly, this question is not theoretical anymore. As sobering as that is, every time, the candidate looked at us with a determined gaze and passion in their hearts and filled us with hope, confidence, and renewed Jewish pride.

In our Jewish New Year, let us undertake this complex task b’yachad / together. We will start small. We will focus less on the broad strokes, the gross overgeneralizations, and more on the individual gifts of each person and the power of each moment, relationship, conversation, or connection. When we oversimplify who we are, minimizing our very identities, it “strips [us] of the fullness of [our] humanity.”<sup>20</sup> As we leave services, we can stop and ask the person next to us what it means to be Jewish, especially in America today. Ask them how they want to engage in their Judaism, and build from there. Find their uniqueness. Revel in their joy of being Jewish. Let them know they are valued, all while acknowledging that they might connect to Judaism in a different way than you.

We are approaching our 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Jew on American soil, and our community, our experiences, and our personal lives are more bewilderingly complex than ever before. But as history has shown, “American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism.”<sup>21</sup> Let us embrace our complexity. Let us celebrate the diversity within our own community. Let us find pride in our Jewish identities, even when it is not convenient to do so, regardless of political affiliation, without necessarily agreeing with every viewpoint and belief. And certainly, let us boldly speak up in the face of anti-Semitism.

5780 opens during a pressing moment in our American Jewish history, with the stench of anti-Semitism rising in all corners. We are also in a beautiful time where we are blessed with a remarkable diversity of Jewish experience and expression. If we focus on the people, the fullness of our identities and communities, we will find our Jewish pride, hope, and resilience; we will find the way to go b’yachad / together.

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Ward, <https://www.tikkun.org/the-evolution-of-identity-politics-an-interview-with-eric-ward>

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna, “American Judaism: A History,” 2004, p. 373-374