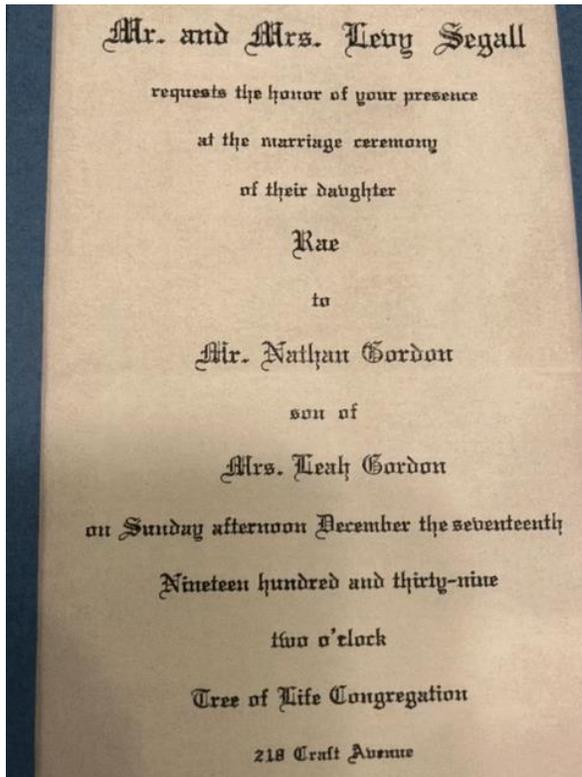


Anti-Semitism Today
Kol Nidre 5780
Rabbi Samuel N. Gordon
October 8, 2019

This past October, I led an interfaith trip to Israel, Palestine, and Jordan composed of a little over two dozen congregants of Sukkat Shalom and First Congregational Church of Wilmette. It was a wonderful pilgrimage with our long time partners at First Congregational jointly led by me and Reverend Stephanie Perdew VanSlyke. After touring the Mediterranean coast and then Galilee in the north, we arrived in Jerusalem on Friday, visited the Christian sites on the Mount of Olives and came into the Old city where we celebrated Shabbat at the Western Wall—the Kotel.

Saturday night, as the sun set, we gathered on the Hebrew Union College complex on King David Street, and on the rooftop of Beit Shmuel, overlooking the Old City Walls, Reverend VanSlyke celebrated communion using the Challah from Shabbat and the wine, and then Rabbi Danny Freeland led us in the havdalah blessings over the wine, spices, and candle. We had just extinguished the havdalah candle in the wine, concluded singing Eliyahu Hanavi, when our phones all started buzzing. It was the news of the shooting at Tree Of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.



This is my parents' wedding invitation. Tree of Life was my family's congregation. My grandparents are buried in the Tree of Life cemetery. My grandparents' yahrzeit plaques are on its walls. My aunt was the multi-term president of its sisterhood, so the tragedy hit me personally. I thought about returning home, but I stayed with our group in Israel. In morning, on the top of Masada, in the ancient synagogue we lit a memorial candle and recited Kaddish. Below, at the Dead Sea, I tried my best to respond to TV interviews from back home.

Most importantly, on that Monday, back at Sukkat Shalom, Rabbi Daniels and Kenny Lyonswright put together, with little notice, a remarkable prayer service that gathered together our extended interfaith community. With

grace, sensitivity, and true leadership, they called forth our clergy partners and many of their congregants from New Trier Township and further afield. Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Bahai, our friends from the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints.

Reverend Jesse Jackson came from Hyde Park to join us. We were embraced, comforted, and supported.

To be very honest, I never expected in my almost 40 years as a rabbi to have to speak about anti-Semitism. I thought anti-Semitism was an issue of the 1930's or 1940's. It was a concern of my parents and their generation. I had always dismissed their warnings and their fears. I viewed it as just so much paranoia on their part. I taught that, by the 1970's, there was no institutional anti-Semitism in America. Even the old social anti-Semitism was over. Every institution of America was open to Jews: universities, law firms, banks, corporations, hospitals. Jews were at the highest levels in the field of politics—from the halls of Congress to the Supreme Court and Executive branch, not to mention local municipal, county, state entities. Nearly every neighborhood and social club was open as well.

The sociologist, Robert Putnam in his book, American Grace, pointed to the fact that all the surveys of American attitudes towards people of other faiths, Jews are the most admired group in America. Putnam especially points to the fact that close personal relationships mitigate prejudices based on theoretical stereotypes. Indeed, the prevalence of intermarriage is one of the greatest proofs of the death of anti-Semitism.

But now, I have been shocked into addressing an issue that I had thought had died away. First, there was the neo-Nazi riot in Charlottesville in August, 2017. Then came Pittsburgh and the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue. It was all a rude awakening for me. Anti-Semitism is THE topic of the moment. Either last week after Rosh Hashanah or tomorrow at your breakfasts, family and friends will ask each of what their rabbis spoke about, and I assure you, every rabbi will have given at least one sermon this year on anti-Semitism.

The scholar, Deborah Lipstadt, has called anti-Semitism the autoimmune disease of the society. It is like shingles. It lives deep within the body politic, festering beneath the surface, but it rises up during times of stress and suddenly bursts out to the surface. Anti-Semitism has been the current topic of numerous commentaries in both the secular press and the Jewish press. It is part of the political conversations of the political divisions between left and right. There are accusations and blame being thrown around, and it is used as a wedge issue as each side attempts to manipulate and pander, in order to gain points for their camp.

So where are we? Let me first speak about the Left—a place I often station myself. There absolutely is anti-Semitism on the Left—especially the far Left. There are some crazy conspiracy theories about Zionist control of American foreign policy. There are appeals to the usual attacks on Jewish banking, commerce, and media. There are harsh criticisms of Israel. But let me stop here to address the issue of Israel. There are those who consider any criticism of Israel a form of anti-Semitism, but they are wrong. Criticism of Israel and its policies is not, by definition, anti-Semitism. If you really want to hear radical bitter diatribes against Israeli policy and leadership, go to the Knesset or read HaAretz, and that is just what comes from the mainstream.

But there is rhetoric that crosses the line and is, in fact, anti-Semitic. Israel is not committing genocide against the Palestinians. Israel is not “crucifying” the Christ-like Palestinians once again. The Israel Defense Forces are not Nazi storm troopers. It is perfectly legitimate to criticize Israel severely but not uniquely. Israel should not be the only pariah state, so I completely reject the anti-Semitism of the Far Left.

I also recognize that the BDS movement has added to the toxicity of the academic world, and that has placed our young people, and many of you who are academics, in a very uncomfortable, unhappy position. But ultimately BDS is ineffective. Israel is one of the top 20 economic powers in the world. BDS will have little to no impact on its economy. Indeed, Israel would be wise to listen to the frustration of those who would hope to change Israel’s Settlement policy and end the Occupation. Preventing elected US representatives from visiting Israel, a supposedly open and free society, was a self-defeating political and public relations act. Prime Minister Netanyahu welcomed PM Viktor Orban of Hungary and thus offered legitimacy to an outrageous anti-Semite and proponent of a truly dangerous philosophy that I will address in a moment.

Let me turn to the anti-Semitism of the Radical Right. Too many analysts want to offer a “balanced” criticism, but the two forms of anti-Semitism are not equivalent. We cannot resort to the simplistic arguments of “What Aboutism.”

This is what you need to know, and far too many people are missing it. There is an anti-Semitism that is far more dangerous, insidious, and violent. This is a movement that has international ties through the Internet to adherents who have never met each other or spoken in real time, but they are true believers. It is known as the Grand Replacement Theory, and one of its chief proponents is a French poet and white nationalist named Renaud Camus, (no relation to Albert Camus.)

(This sermon was written before the attack on the synagogue in Halle, Germany by a follower of the Grand Replacement Theory)

The Grand Replacement Theory imagines a “White Genocide” taking place in Europe particularly as a result of immigration from Muslim countries but also including Africa and the Far East. The declining white birthrate in Europe adds to the fear that Third World populations of people of color will soon overrun Europe. Abortion Rights is often seen as another aspect of this supposed conspiracy to destroy the white “race.”

Replacement Theory followers talk of the “invasion” and “infestation” of “hordes” of “aliens.” The language should remind you of Germany in the 1930’s, but it has appeared in the various manifestos of the murderous extremists of Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, El Paso, Poway, CA., Christ Church, NZ., and elsewhere. It has also been part of the vocabulary used by the elected leadership of our nation.

In America these white supremacists imagine invading hordes from Muslim countries of the Near East but also Hispanics and Latinos from south of our borders.

They believe in a fantasy of purely white, Protestant America from an imagined Pre Civil War America.

Here is the anti-Semitic part, and the aspect you need to pay close attention to. It may be the case that some of these extremists see Jews as part of that invading horde, but the current form of anti-Semitism is far more insidious. Deborah Lipstadt also pointed out that most prejudice against minority groups is a function of “punching down” to the class and social group below you. Anti-Semitism is more a case of “punching up.” The Supremacists see Jews as elitists, globalists, and cosmopolitans conspiring to bring these invading swarms of non-white “Savages” into the West. Their conspiracy delusions often focus on specific figures such as George Soros who they believe is manipulating and underwriting caravans of Latino invaders. It is similar language to that of Viktor Orban of Hungary and Marine lePen of France. Germany, Italy, Belgium, all have right wing parties that promulgate this same conspiracy theory. George Soros is the “puppeteer,” demonized in much the same way as were the Rothschilds in an earlier time. This was the thesis of the discredited fraud of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, created by the Tsarist Secret Police and promulgated in this country by Henry Ford.

So the madness is not new, but these conspiracy theories seem to have found fertile ground and legitimacy in our country. Its followers are often some of the same people who believe in Pizza Gate or the false flag narrative of the Sandy Hook children or who claim that Parkland School students are “crisis actors.” We might dismiss these conspiratorial fantasies as the ravings of madmen (and women,) but they have attained a legitimacy that should deeply frighten us. There are those, even at the highest levels of power, who exploit those conspiratorial delusions. Perhaps they even believe them themselves.

The Charlottesville chant of “Jews will not replace us” meant that Jews will not conspire to replace white America with immigrants from Mexico and Central America and with Muslims from the Middle East. They see immigration as a nefarious plot foisted on America by Jewish conspirators. I believe this is what should frighten and concern us most. The real danger to Jews, and to all of western civilization, is the rise of the racist, neo-Nazi ideology of Replacement Theory. That is what drove the mass shooters in Charleston, El Paso, and Christ Church NZ. This was the chant of the neo-Nazis of Charlottesville.

This was especially the case in Pittsburgh. Yes, the Tree of Life madmen was out to kill Jews, but it was because the Reconstructionist Congregation had celebrated HIAS Refugee Shabbat to support Muslim and Latino refugees coming into America. We at Sukkat Shalom had, just the week before, supported HIAS Refugee Shabbat as well. That is who we are. That is our mission

Here is the good news. This is NOT the 1930’s, and America is not Weimar Germany. Pittsburgh was not Kristalnacht. In Germany, the local authorities pogrom was enabled and supported the pogrom. The police stood by or helped the rioters. Neighbors stood with crossed arms and looked on.

October 27th, 2018 was not November 9th and 10th of 1938. The local government immediately responded. The police were there to protect the Jewish community. All of Pittsburgh was united in its response. There were touching symbolic acts of solidarity. Members of the beloved Pittsburgh Steelers attended the funerals. The Pittsburgh Post Gazette, in a first for the American secular press, published this headline.



The first lines of the mourner's kaddish, in Aramaic, in Hebrew script.



Here, at Sukkat Shalom, on the Monday following the massacre, we were joined by our extended community of faith demonstrating their support and solidarity. That is a key lesson we need to take away from that event and the others. Yes, we have had to respond with increased security and changes to our building. Our security detail of Phil, Dan, and Kyle have become part of our congregational family. Please thank them when you see them. But even their presence is not the answer.

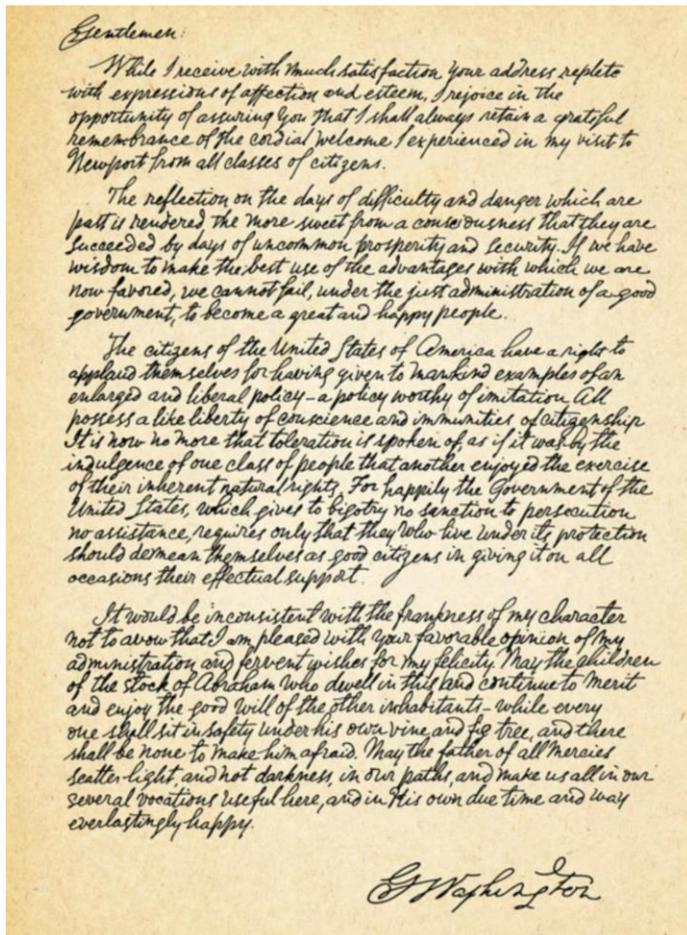
More importantly, we continue to build our deep relationships with the communities of faith on the North Shore, Chicago, and beyond. We don't live behind the self imposed walls of golden ghettos. We maintain our integration in the fields of commerce, law. Medicine, and academics. We marry whom we wish, and we extend the reach of our families. We gather diverse family and friends around our Passover seder tables and into our sukkah. We continue to welcome the stranger, having ourselves been strangers and outcasts. We are all the sons and daughters of immigrants and aliens. That is why we have helped to resettle our Rohingya families. Through Stock the Shelves, we support refugees in the Rogers Park area. We gather supplies to deliver to detention centers on our southern border.

Our goal is not to replace anyone, but as children of immigrants, we have a different understanding of the greatness of this nation. We do not seek a racially purified white America, no matter how anachronistic the myth. Our present values are defined by our past, whether that past is Egypt where we were strangers in a strange land, or Ellis Island or other ports of entry. We are taught to know the plight of the stranger and outcast having been stranger, immigrants, outcasts ourselves. No one, left or right, should doubt our loyalty.

There is a Jewish covenant with America that goes back to our nation's founding. The Jews came to America loyal to the command of the Prophet Jeremiah (29:7):

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Eternal on its behalf. For through its welfare you will prosper.”

And as if to respond to that covenantal promise, In August of 1790, George Washington, wrote to the leaders of the Touro Synagogue of Newport, RI.



Gentlemen:

While I receive with much satisfaction your address replete with expressions of affection and esteem, I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport from all classes of citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and happy people.

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy—a policy worthy of imitation. All possess a like liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G Washington

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“May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this lands continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants----while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

What Washington promised the Jews must be guaranteed to all people on these shores. These may be worrisome and frightening times, but we

must never forget who we are and what we stand for. Our values and our teachings remain the true source of our strength. Those same values must remain the core foundation of this nation.

So may this New Year be a year of well-being, security, and respect for all people, peace, and blessing.